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The Greatest Controversies of Early Christian History

Course Guidebook

Professor Bart D. Ehrman
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Bart D. Ehrman, Ph.D.

James A. Gray Distinguished Professor
The University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill

Professor Bart D. Ehrman is the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor at The University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, where he has taught since 1988. He completed his undergraduate work at Wheaton College and received his M.Div. and Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary. Before taking his position at UNC, Professor Ehrman taught at Rutgers University.

Professor Ehrman has published dozens of book reviews and scholarly articles for academic journals. He has written or edited 27 books, including 4 best sellers on *The New York Times* list: *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*; *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*; *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know about Them)*; and *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are*. Professor Ehrman also has served as president of the Society of Biblical Literature, Southeastern Region; book review editor of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*; editor of the Scholars' Press monograph series The New Testament in the Greek Fathers; and coeditor in chief for the journal *Vigiliae Christianae*.

Professor Ehrman has received several teaching awards, including the John William Pope Center Spirit of Inquiry Award, the UNC Students' Undergraduate Teaching Award, the Phillip and Ruth Hettleman Prize for Artistic and Scholarly Achievement by Young Faculty, and the Bowman and Gordon Gray Professorship (awarded for excellence in undergraduate teaching).

For The Great Courses, Professor Ehrman has taught *The New Testament*; *History of the Bible: The Making of the New Testament Canon*; *Lost*

Christianities: Christian Scriptures and the Battles over Authentication; *From Jesus to Constantine: A History of Early Christianity*; *The Historical Jesus*; and *After the New Testament: The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*. ■

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The Greatest Controversies of Early Christian History

Scope:

Even though early Christianity is one of the most studied fields in the entire discipline of religious studies, numerous controversies continue to puzzle both scholars and laypeople. This course examines 24 of these controversies to show why they have fascinated students of the Christian religion and to attempt to resolve them with academic rigor. In terms of its chronological scope, the course spans the time from the historical Jesus—beginning with his birth around 4 B.C.E.—up to the time of the emperor Constantine in the 4th century, when Christianity was turned into a legal and much favored religion in the Roman Empire.

The course begins with controversies surrounding the birth and young life of Jesus, about which we have a record in two of the gospels of the New Testament (Matthew and Luke) and in later noncanonical accounts, such as the Proto-Gospel of James. Two of the most pressing issues concern "common knowledge" about Jesus that has been called into question by scholars: Was Jesus really born in Bethlehem? And was his mother really a virgin? We also ask whether he had a twin brother.

From the birth of Jesus, we turn to his life. Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, scholars have asked whether references to Jesus can be found in the scrolls, or whether Jesus was connected with the community that produced them. Is either possibility probable? And is it true that Jesus, like the producers of the scrolls, believed that he was living at the end of time and that the world would end within his own generation?

Apart from the community of the scrolls, what can we say about Jesus's companions? Was Mary Magdalene a particularly close disciple, with whom Jesus had a personal relationship? Is it possible, in fact, that he was married, whether to her or to someone else?

From the life of Jesus, we move to the reports surrounding his betrayal, death, and resurrection. With respect to his betrayal, if we grant that it was

Judas Iscariot who turned Jesus over to the authorities, why did he do so? And even more intriguing, what is it that Judas betrayed? When Jesus was executed, was it because of Jewish opposition? Did the Jews kill Jesus? And what about Pontius Pilate? Are the later rumors that he became a follower of Jesus plausible?

Arguably the greatest controversy of Jesus's life has to do with its aftermath, when his disciples claimed that he had been raised from the dead. What is it that drove them to say so? Did they actually discover his tomb to be empty? Did they have visions of him after his death?

We move from the historical Jesus to the responses to Jesus among people after his day. The early Christians maintained that Jesus was the suffering messiah who had been predicted by scripture, but non-Christian Jews insisted that the Hebrew Bible never spoke of a future messiah who would suffer. Which of these views is correct? It was the apostle Paul more than anyone else who proclaimed the death and resurrection of Jesus as the suffering messiah who brought salvation to the world. Did Paul represent the same religious views as Jesus himself? Given the way Christianity developed theologically, does it make better sense to say that Paul, rather than Jesus, was the "founder" of Christianity?

What can we say about the authors of the New Testament? Were the gospels actually written by the apostles, or are their authors unknown? And what about the other books of the New Testament? Scholars have long argued that some of them were not written by the authors whose names are attached to them, that, for example, some of the letters allegedly by Paul and Peter were not actually written by Paul and Peter. Could there be forgeries in the New Testament?

The most intriguing book of the New Testament is the Apocalypse of John. Does it predict what will happen in our own future, or is that a misreading of the book?

The early Christian movement was remarkably diverse. Is it possible that the early Christian Gnostics actually represent the earliest form of the religion? And do the Gnostic gospels give us an accurate vision of who Jesus really was? In later times, a number of legends sprang up about the apostles of

Jesus, for example, that Thomas was the missionary to India and that Peter was crucified upside down. Is there any historical value in these legends? When these apostles were engaged in their missionary activities, they faced opposition from both pagans and Jews. Why were the early Christians persecuted? Was Christianity illegal in the Roman Empire?

We then turn to the question of whether the Old Testament should be considered a Christian book, and if so, in what sense is it Christian? We also look at the most important theological question in traditional Christianity: Where did the idea of the Trinity come from? Did the earliest Christians believe that there were three persons in the Godhead yet only one God?

The books that eventually became the New Testament were circulated in handwritten copies. Do we know what the authors originally wrote, given the fact that the thousands of surviving copies all contain mistakes—many thousands of mistakes? And how did we get the 27 books that became the New Testament? Was this a decision made by the emperor Constantine or by a church council? When was it made, and what were the grounds for making it?

The earliest years of the Christian religion witnessed enormous controversies, and the controversies have not died out even today. The course concludes by considering why Christianity, in particular, is prone to foster controversy and why it will probably do so for all time to come. ■

Was Jesus Born in Bethlehem?

Lecture 1

There always have been and always will be controversies surrounding the early years of Christianity. Some of these controversies make their way onto the front page of newspapers, and some are found in popular novels and films. Modern scholars of antiquity themselves debate many controversial issues surrounding early Christianity. Do the Gnostic gospels portray the real Jesus? Is Paul the true founder of Christianity? Who chose the 27 books of the New Testament? Such issues matter because Christianity has been and remains a dominant force in both Western and parts of Eastern civilization. Achieving a better understanding of Christianity means achieving a better understanding of our history and our world, whether we are Christian or not.

Sources for the Life of Jesus

- Our main sources for the life of Jesus are the gospels that were written by early Christians. We have about 50 gospels from early Christianity, though only 4 of those are in the New Testament.

- The New Testament gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are the earliest among the 50 or so that have survived. Scholars typically believe that Mark was the first of the gospels to be written, possibly around 65–70 C.E., about 35 to 40 years after Jesus died. Matthew and Luke were probably written 10 or 15 years after Mark (80–85 C.E.), and John was probably the last gospel, written around 90–95 C.E.

- It's important to remember that the authors of the four gospels did not know they were writing the New Testament. The author Matthew, for example, probably thought that he was writing an account of Jesus for his own community. It was only much later that Christians widely began to consider Matthew's account of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection as a book of scripture.

- The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are accounts of Jesus's life that are based on what the authors had heard. They are both valuable and problematic as historical sources.
    - Contrary to what many people think, the gospels almost certainly were not written by eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus's life. Their authors were highly educated, Greek-speaking Christians living decades after Jesus. In contrast, Jesus and his disciples were Aramaic-speaking peasants who were probably illiterate.

    - The four gospels were written somewhere between 35 and 60 years after the events they narrate. The authors of the gospels based their accounts on oral traditions, stories about Jesus that had been in circulation for years and had probably changed in the process of transmission.

Luke's Account of Jesus's Birth

- The notion of Jesus being born in Bethlehem is found only in Matthew and Luke, not in any of the other books of the New Testament. The two accounts of Matthew and Luke are problematic from a historical perspective because they contain implausibilities and contradictions to the known facts of history and because they contain discrepancies between themselves.

- Luke's gospel describes the birth of Jesus in chapters 1 and 2.
    - The story begins with an annunciation to Mary, a young woman who lives in Nazareth of Galilee in the northern part of what we today think of as Israel. The angel Gabriel appears to her and announces that she is to bear the Son of God.

    - In chapter 2, we learn that Mary and her husband, Joseph, have to make a trip away from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register for the Roman census.

    - When they reach Bethlehem, there is no room in the inn, and Mary must give birth elsewhere. We're not told whether the birth took place in a stable, a cave, or some other location.

The child was placed in a manger, and shepherds came and worshiped him.

- Thirty-two days after the birth, Mary must perform an offering to cleanse herself from her ritual impurity. She and Joseph then return home.

- This familiar story is filled with historical problems. To begin with, the idea that there was a worldwide census at the time of Caesar Augustus is completely implausible. We have a number of records from the reign of Caesar Augustus, and none of them mention a worldwide (or empire-wide) census. Further, a requirement to return to one's ancestral home for the census would have resulted in massive migrations across the Roman Empire.

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The gospels of Matthew and Luke independently indicate that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but they offer differing accounts of how Joseph and Mary came to be in that location.

- It seems clear that no census took place, but Luke knew that Joseph and Mary came from Nazareth and he believed that Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem because an Old Testament prophecy (Micah 5:2) proclaimed that the savior would come from Bethlehem.

- It's also interesting to note that in Luke's account, the census took place when Quirinius was the governor of Syria. Luke tells us that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, but Quirinius was governor 10 years after Herod's death.

Matthew's Account of Jesus's Birth

- Matthew's account contains a number of stories that are not found in Luke, just as Luke's stories are not found in Matthew.
    - According to Matthew's gospel, there is no trip to Bethlehem from Nazareth. Instead, we're told that Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her betrothed, decides that he will secretly divorce her, but he then he learns in a dream that the child is by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is then born in Bethlehem.

    - Wise men from the east—astronomers—follow a star that has told them that the king of the Jews has been born someplace in the west. The wise men go to Jerusalem and ask whether this is the city where the king of the Jews is to be born.

    - King Herod, the real king of the Jews, finds out that these wise men have come, and he asks his Bible scholars where the king of the Jews is to be born. The scholars inform Herod that the king is to be born in Bethlehem.

    - Herod conveys this information to the wise men and indicates that they should tell him when they find the child so that he can come to worship him. But of course, Herod doesn't want to worship the child; he wants to destroy the child.

    - The wise men continue on their journey, following the star, which stops over the house where Jesus is in Bethlehem. The wise men worship Jesus, but they return by a different route to avoid informing Herod. Herod is enraged when he realizes that he has been deceived. He sends out his soldiers to kill every male child aged two and under.

    - When Joseph learns in a dream that Herod is out to kill the child, he flees with Jesus and Mary to Egypt. When Herod dies, Joseph and his family return home, but they can't live in Bethlehem because Herod's son, Archelaus, is now the king there. Instead, the family goes to Nazareth.

- This account also has its implausibilities, especially a star that seems to travel and stop over a particular house. There are also inconsistencies between this account and the one in Luke. Anyone reading the two closely will notice the general differences: the annunciation to Mary versus the dream of Joseph, the trip to Bethlehem from Nazareth versus the flight to Egypt, the shepherds versus the wise men worshiping Jesus.

- These differences could easily be accounted for simply by saying that Matthew recorded some of the stories that happened and Luke recorded others. But there are also contradictions between Matthew and Luke.
    - In Matthew's story, it appears that the hometown of Joseph and Mary is Bethlehem. The wise men worship Jesus in a house, apparently one in which Joseph and Mary live.

    - Moreover, the wise men seem to come to Jesus many months, possibly up to two years, after he was born. We know this from Herod's decision to have boys under two years old slaughtered by his troops, based on the information he received from the wise men.

    - Finally, when Joseph and his family flee to Egypt and return, they are unable to relocate to Bethlehem, presumably their hometown, because it is now under the rule of Archelaus; for this reason, they go to Nazareth. This is obviously at odds with Luke's account, in which Joseph and Mary are from Nazareth.

- The other inconsistency between the two accounts involves what happens to Jesus and his family after his birth. According to Luke's account, 32 days after she gave birth, Mary had to perform a sacrifice in order to cleanse her ritual impurity; afterward, she and Joseph returned to Nazareth. But if that's the case, how can Matthew be right that after Jesus's birth, the mother, father, and child fled to Egypt? There is no time for the flight to Egypt that Matthew tells about if Luke is right that they returned immediately to Nazareth.

- In all the gospel sources, Jesus comes from Nazareth. We can imagine why early Christians might want to make up a story about Jesus being born in Bethlehem—because that's where the savior was supposed to come from—but no one would make up a story that Jesus actually came from the insignificant town of Nazareth. Most critical historians have concluded that Jesus was probably not only raised in Nazareth but also born there, in the hometown of his parents, Joseph and Mary.

The Divergence of History and Faith

- Does the fact that we have these kinds of discrepancies mean that we can't trust the Bible's lessons? Does it mean that Jesus was not the messiah? The answer is no. What these discrepancies mean is that history and faith sometimes diverge from each other.

- In these lectures, we will approach controversies of early Christianity not from the perspective of faith but from the perspective of history. We will not deny or affirm Christian belief or the approach to the Bible by faith; instead, we will take the approach of the historian—one who tries to reconstruct what actually happened in the past without assuming any particular faith commitments.

- You may or may not feel that the conclusions we reach about controversial issues will have any bearing on your faith. But the fact that so many issues have been in dispute in Christianity from the earliest days of the faith is interesting in itself. What makes Christianity so subject to controversy on so many points? Why have those issues persisted for so long, and why have they so often been divisive? As we look for ways to resolve the disputes that are the subject of this course, we'll look for answers to those fundamental questions, as well.

Suggested Reading

Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*.

———, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*.

Questions to Consider

1. What kind of discrepancies between two accounts would make you think that one of them, at least, could not be historical?

2. How does one establish the probability that Jesus was born in either Bethlehem or Nazareth?

Was Jesus's Mother a Virgin?

Lecture 2

Belief in the virgin birth has become a litmus test for many Christians in our world and has been important in the history of Christianity. Some Christians believe that Jesus had to be born of a virgin to fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament. Moreover, the virgin birth was taken to show that Jesus was literally the Son of God, not simply human. In later times, the doctrine of the virgin birth became important because Mary herself was seen to be a semidivine figure. In this lecture, we will ask what our ancient texts say about the virginity of Jesus's mother and what kinds of historical conclusions we can draw from these texts.

Defining Terms of Jesus's Conception

- The term "virginal conception" refers to the idea that Mary became pregnant without having sex. In this view, she was impregnated directly by God, without physical contact with a man.

- Technically, the term "virgin birth" means that even after giving birth, Mary was a virgin; that is, she was physically intact, without having her hymen broken. This became a later doctrine of the Catholic Church, but it is not explicitly stated in the New Testament.

- The term "immaculate conception" refers to a doctrine involving not only the birth of Jesus but also the birth of Mary herself.
    - According to Roman Catholic tradition, Mary was not a normal human being. She was the one chosen by God to bring Jesus into the world. As the vessel that God chose to bear the Son of God, she, too, was unique. Mary's mother was not a virgin, but she conceived Mary miraculously. God allowed her mother to conceive of Mary without passing on to her what is called the sin nature.

    - In Catholic doctrine, the sin nature is the propensity to sin found in every human. According to this doctrine, the sin

nature has passed on since Adam, the first man, sinned. It passes from parent to child during the sex act in which the child is conceived. Thus, by virtue of being born, everyone has a sin nature. But Mary was conceived without a sin nature by a miracle of God.

- The immaculate conception is not referred to in the New Testament; the virginal conception of Jesus is recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, but it is not mentioned in any other book of the New Testament.

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The devotion to Mary that started in the early Middle Ages and continues today relies on the belief that she was a virgin.

Matthew's Account of the Virginal Conception

- Matthew tells us that Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, thinking that someone else had made her pregnant, wants to divorce her quietly. Just when Joseph has resolved to do this, he has a dream in which an angel told him that Mary's child was conceived from the Holy Spirit. The angel says, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet. Look, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emanuel, which means God is with us" (Matthew 1:22).
  - The prediction in scripture that Matthew quotes is Isaiah 7:14. In fact, the first two chapters of Matthew have a number of "fulfillment citations"; these are indications by Matthew that events of Jesus's life were fulfillments of predictions by the prophets hundreds of years earlier in the Hebrew Bible.

- In chapter 2, we learn that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, because that's what the prophet predicted. In chapter 2:18, we learned that the reason Herod had the children in Bethlehem killed was to fulfill a prophecy of scripture. In chapter 2:23, we learn that the reason Jesus was said to have come from Nazareth, even though he was born in Bethlehem, is also that the scriptures had said he was to be a Nazarene.

- The fulfillment of scripture was important to early Christians and to none more so than Matthew. The early Christians believed that the authors of the Jewish Bible had predicted what the messiah would be like and what he would do. The fulfillment of these predictions by Jesus was understood to be proof that he was the expected messiah. Thus, in his fulfillment citations, Matthew emphasizes Jesus's fulfillment of predictions.

- Some of the fulfillment citations in Matthew, however, are highly problematic, especially the one relating to Isaiah 7:14. Matthew quotes the verse from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which refers to "the Virgin." But Isaiah and the other books of the Old Testament were originally written in Hebrew, and the Hebrew version of Isaiah 7:14 refers to "a young woman," not "the Virgin."
  - In the time that Isaiah was written, the northern nation of Israel and the nation of Syria had laid siege to Jerusalem, which was in Judah, the southern nation of Israel. The prophet Isaiah had reassured the king of Judah, Ahaz, that God would give him a sign that all would be well.

  - Isaiah says to Ahaz: "the Lord himself will give you a sign; look the young woman is with child, and she shall bear a son and shall name him Emanuel." In verses 15 and 16, the prophet continues: "This child shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, for before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted."

- In other words, before the child is old enough to know the difference between right and wrong, he will be eating luxurious foods, which means that there will be no more threat of economic disaster by the two kings of northern Israel and Syria; these two kings will desert the siege so that Judah will be safe once more.

- In its own context, Isaiah 7 is talking about a political situation, but when this passage was translated into Greek, the Greek translators, for unknown reasons, chose to translate the word *alma*, a "young woman," as the Greek word *parthenos*, which also meant "young woman" and could at times mean "virgin."

- Matthew, living hundreds of years later, quoted the passage in Isaiah in order to show that the prophecy had been fulfilled in Jesus, even though that's not what the prophecy originally meant.

Luke's Account of the Virginal Conception

- In Luke's account, the angel Gabriel comes to Mary, who is betrothed to Joseph, and tells her that she is to conceive a child. Mary becomes confused because she has never had sex with a man, she's not married, and she doesn't understand how it is that she can have a child.

- Luke 1:35 reads: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy. He will be called the Son of God."
  - This is the angel's explanation. Mary will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, not by a man. For that reason, the child will be called the Son of God because, in fact, God, in a very real sense, will be the father of this child.

  - Here, we have no word of Jesus's mother being a virgin because she had to fulfill scripture. Here, the reason that she's a virgin is so that Jesus, in a more literal sense, will be a son of God.

- This story in Luke calls to mind other accounts that we have from the ancient world in non-Jewish writings about other divine men. In fact, in the ancient world, a large number of men were thought to be sons of God. Typically, these men had been supernaturally born, could perform miracles, could predict the future, and at the end of their lives, ascended to heaven. Alexander the Great and the philosopher Apollonius of Tyana are examples of two such men of supernatural birth.

- Note that in these ancient stories, the mother is physically penetrated by a divine being; she is not a virgin. That's different from what happens in the Gospel of Luke, where the Holy Spirit makes Mary pregnant, although some people have suspected that there is a suggestion in Luke of physical contact.

- Even in the Jewish tradition, there are cases in which divine beings produce offspring with mortals; the most famous instance is in Genesis 6, in which we're told that the sons of God look down upon the daughters of men and saw that they were desirable. The sons came down and cohabited with the daughters, and their offspring were the Nephilim, the giants who once lived in Canaan.

- The stories of Luke and Matthew are somewhat different than the story in Genesis and the Greek and Roman myths because in the Christian tradition, God is understood to be unique and completely transcendent, far above mortals in majesty, power, and being. Christians would not have accepted the physical implications of God having sex with a mortal woman.

The Proto-Gospel of James

- In later tradition, it was understood that Mary was a virgin even after giving birth. This tradition comes to us first in a gospel that does not appear in the New Testament, the Proto-Gospel of James.

- This gospel, allegedly written by one of Jesus's brothers, tells us why Mary was qualified to be the vessel through whom the Son of God was born into the world. We learn that she herself was

conceived miraculously, was raised to be holy, and had led a holy life up until the time she was betrothed to Joseph.

- In the account of James, Mary gives birth to Jesus before she and Joseph reach Bethlehem to register for the census. After the birth, a midwife named Salome gives Mary an internal exam and discovers that her hymen is still intact. James's gospel was probably written 70 to 80 years after the gospels of the New Testament.

- This story later led to the official Roman Catholic doctrine that Mary was a perpetual virgin, meaning that she never had sex. Mary did not inherit the sin nature and did not participate in that act that passes along the sin nature through intercourse.

- The idea of the perpetual virginity of Mary has since caused problems for people who read the Bible because, as we will see, several passages in the New Testament mention the brothers and sisters of Jesus.

Suggested Reading

Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*.

———, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*.

Questions to Consider

1. Do Matthew and Luke portray Jesus as born from a virgin for the same reason or for different reasons?

2. Is there any way a historian can establish the probability of a virgin birth?

Did Jesus Have a Twin Brother?

Lecture 3

Did Jesus have brothers and sisters? Protestant denominations believe the answer to this question is yes because the New Testament tells us that Jesus had siblings, but in the Roman Catholic Church, Jesus is said not to have brothers. As we saw in the last lecture, it was widely thought that Mary was a virgin not only when she conceived Jesus but afterwards, which means, of course, that Jesus did not have brothers because Mary never had sex. In this lecture, we'll examine the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church on the question of whether Jesus had brothers, and we'll explore what the noncanonical gospels have to tell us about the question of whether he was a twin.

Two Traditions about Jesus's Brothers

- Both Mark 6 and John 7 refer to Jesus's brothers, but in the Roman Catholic Church, the brothers of Jesus mentioned in these two passages are not actually brothers. Two different traditions developed in Catholicism concerning the identity of these alleged brothers.

- The first tradition can be found in the Proto-Gospel of James. According to this gospel, when Mary became betrothed to Joseph, he was already an old man. In fact, he had previously been married and had children, one of whom was James. The reason Joseph is an old man in the account apparently is to show that Joseph and Mary were not a normal young couple who would naturally be expected to have sex after they married. The siblings of Jesus are the children of Joseph from his previous marriage.

- According to the second Roman Catholic tradition, the "brothers" of Jesus are not Joseph's sons either. Some of the church fathers found the idea offensive not just that Mary would have sex but that Joseph would. For these church fathers, if Joseph was to be connected with Jesus, he, too, must be a virgin. Jerome, the first of

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Many medieval depictions show Joseph as an old man; the understanding was that he had been given Mary to protect as her guardian.

the church fathers to promote this idea with any force, insisted that the alleged brothers of Jesus were his cousins.

- Neither of these interpretations has any support in the earliest sources of the New Testament. It's most likely that when the New Testament documents mention Jesus's brothers, it means that Jesus had brothers. But was one of the brothers a twin? This is not an issue today, but it was in the early church.

The Gospel of Thomas

- In 1945, in Egypt near a town called Nag Hammadi, a group of field hands discovered a jar containing a collection of 13 leather-bound books. They had made probably the most significant discovery in the 20th century of Jewish and Christian texts outside of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

- The books are small Christian anthologies, containing 52 different documents. They were produced in the 4th Christian century, but the documents in the books were originally composed much earlier. The Gospel of Thomas was probably from the early 2nd century. It may be our oldest gospel outside of the four of the New Testament. It consists of 114 sayings of Jesus, many of which are similar to those found in the New Testament and many of which are very different.

- The Gospel of Thomas begins as follows: "These are the Secret Sayings of Jesus and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote them down; the one who finds the meaning of these words will not taste death." For this author, salvation does not come to people who believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus; salvation comes to those who interpret Jesus's secret teachings. The death and resurrection are not mentioned in this gospel.

- The Gospel of Thomas is part of the early Christian Apocrypha, one of the many gospels that are found outside of the New Testament. It's probably the most famous of these other gospels, and it's widely considered to be the most important. The gospel may include actual sayings of Jesus.

- The author calls himself Didymus Judas Thomas. The name Didymus is a word that means "twin" in Greek, and the name Thomas means "twin" in Aramaic. This author, whose actual name is Judas (not Judas Iscariot), is a twin, allegedly the twin of Jesus.

The Acts of Thomas

- In the church of Syria, in antiquity, it was widely thought that Didymus Judas Thomas was, in fact, Jesus's identical twin. We learn this from a different book associated with Didymus Judas Thomas, the Acts of Thomas. This book is one of the Apocryphal Acts, an account of the lives of the apostles of Jesus from outside the New Testament. The Acts of Thomas probably originated in Syria, possibly in the 2nd century.

- The apostle Thomas is best known today as the missionary who took the gospel to India. This idea comes from this ancient book.
  - In the opening of the Acts of Thomas, Jesus has died, has been resurrected, and has ascended to heaven. The apostles of Jesus are deciding to what regions of the world they will travel to spread the gospel.

  - Judas Thomas, who is also called Didymus, draws the lot to go to India, but he refuses; for reasons he won't explain, India is the one place on earth that he doesn't want to go. The apostles have no luck at convincing him to change his mind.

  - Finally, Jesus himself pulls a trick on his twin brother. A man from India has come to Jerusalem to find a carpenter for the king. Jesus descends from heaven in human form and tells this man that he has a slave he can sell who is a carpenter. Jesus writes up a bill of sale, indicating that he has sold his slave, Judas, to the king of India.

  - The representative of the king then asks Judas: Is this man—pointing to Jesus—your master? Of course, Judas answers yes because he now understands that Jesus is his Lord. The representative then tells Judas that he has been purchased from Jesus; thus, the apostle is led off to India.

- The fact that Judas Thomas is seen as Jesus's identical twin becomes clear in a later episode in the story.
  - En route to India, Judas Thomas and the representative of the king make a stop at a city called Andropolis. In Andropolis, as it happens, the daughter of the king is being married to a local aristocrat. Thomas, who is a good ascetic Christian, is opposed to the pleasures of the flesh, even for those who are married.

  - Early on in Christianity, it was thought that those who were focused on the spiritual life would not give in to physical pleasure, and in fact, physical pleasure could interfere with the possibility of spiritual reward. Ascetic Christians were opposed

to rich food, good drink, luxuries of any kind, and sex, even sex within marriage. Eventually, this idea that sex should be opposed even within marriage became the basis of the Roman Catholic teachings that priests should remain celibate.

- Thomas attends the wedding, but it's quite clear that he is unhappy. He does not want the royal couple to consummate the marriage because that would be a sin. The king asks Thomas to pray over the couple, and he reluctantly does so, asking that God's will be done for them; he then leaves.

- When the bridegroom takes his bride into the bridal chamber, he sees Jesus. He thinks it's Thomas, but he can't understand how Thomas, who just left, could now be in the bridal chamber. The reason he thinks Jesus is Thomas is that Jesus and Thomas are identical twins.

- Jesus explains to the bridegroom that they are, in fact, brothers, and he convinces the couple not to have sex. When the king learns that the marriage has not been consummated, he goes after Thomas to punish him, but Thomas has already set sail, and Jesus has returned to heaven.

The Connection to Greek and Roman Myths

- Given that Mary was a virgin and was impregnated by the Holy Spirit, how could early Christians believe that Jesus had a mortal twin brother? The reality is that we don't know how the Syrian Christians who thought that Jesus had a twin brother came to that idea or what doctrines they had about Mary. It may be, however, that the events in these Syriac stories are related to Greek and Roman mythologies of twin brothers, one mortal and one immortal.

- The clearest instance of this situation is that of Heracles (Roman: Hercules) and his twin brother, Iphicles. The story is told in a number of ancient sources, most interestingly by the Roman playwright Plautus in his comedy, *Amphitryon.*

- Amphitryon is a general in the army who has gone off to war, leaving his wife pregnant. Jupiter looks down from heaven on Amphitryon's wife, Alcmena, while she's pregnant and is attracted to her. Jupiter appears to her in the shape of Amphitryon, claiming that he has returned from war. Alcmena welcomes him with open arms, and the two go to bed.
    - Jupiter has such a wonderful time having sex with Alcmena that he stops the constellations and their movements. He stops time altogether so that he can continue to enjoy himself in Alcmena's bed. Finally, he allows the constellations to begin moving again.

    - Jupiter then returns to heaven, but the true Amphitryon appears and is surprised that his wife doesn't welcome him. She thinks she's just spent the night in his embrace. In the end, Alcmena, who was already pregnant by Amphitryon, has also become pregnant by Jupiter.

    - Alcmena then gives birth to twins: the son of Amphitryon, the mortal Iphicles, and the son of Jupiter, Hercules.

- It's possible that the Syriac Christians believed that Mary was made pregnant by a mortal, Joseph, and by God through the Holy Spirit and that she gave birth to a mortal son, Judas Thomas, and an immortal son, Jesus. It thus makes sense that Didymus Judas Thomas would be the author of the Gospel of Thomas. Recall how it begins: "These are the Secret Sayings of Jesus and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote them down. The one who finds the meaning of these words will not taste death." Who better to know the secret teachings of Jesus than his own identical twin?

Suggested Reading

Ehrman and Plese, *The Other Gospels*.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*.

Questions to Consider

1. How does the idea that Thomas was Jesus's brother contribute to the plot of the Acts of Thomas?

2. Why might the author of the Gospel of Thomas want his readers to think that he was Jesus's twin?

Is Jesus in the Dead Sea Scrolls?

Lecture 4

Numerous significant archaeological discoveries of ancient Jewish and Christian manuscripts have been made over the past two centuries, but arguably, the most significant discovery of them all was of the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in 1947. The Dead Sea Scrolls are a wide range of Jewish documents from about the same time and location as Jesus. They have proved significant for understanding the historical Jesus and the rise of early Christianity. In this lecture, we'll explore questions asked by both scholars and laypeople ever since the discovery in 1947: Was Jesus a member of the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls? Is Jesus mentioned in the scrolls, either explicitly or in code?

Judaism in the Days of Jesus

- Judaism was a distinct religion and culture in the ancient world. All other religions and cultures were polytheistic, but Jews at the time of Jesus insisted that there was only one God. Moreover, this one God was the God who created the world and had chosen the Jews to be his special people. To help the Jews be the people of God, God had given them a Law through Moses, as found in the Hebrew Bible, the Torah.

- The Torah told the people of God both how to live in community with one another and how to worship God. Jews in the ancient world did not see the Law of God as a burden but as a blessing, God's greatest gift to his people, telling them how they could worship him and how they could relate to one another. Virtually all Jews at the time of Jesus subscribed to the beliefs that there was one God, that the Jews were the chosen people, and that the Law had been given by God.

- A variety of Jewish sects existed in the time of Jesus, although most Jews did not belong to any one of these sects. Among the most well-known sects were the Pharisees, believers in strict adherence

to Jewish Law; the Sadducees, believers in a literal interpretation of the Torah; and the Essenes, a splinter group from the rest of Judaism.

- The Essenes believed that the Pharisees were intent on finding loopholes in the Law to make it easier to follow and that the Sadducees had corrupted the Temple. They insisted on keeping their own purity intact by removing themselves from the impurities of those around them. For centuries, we had no original sources from the Essenes, but today, most scholars believe that the Dead Sea Scrolls were produced by the Essenes, living in a community known as Qumran.

Contents of the Dead Sea Scrolls

- Some 200 of the Dead Sea Scrolls are manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible; Psalms, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and a fourth book that did not make it into the Hebrew Bible, 1 Enoch, are commonly found among these manuscripts.

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The Dead Sea Scrolls were first discovered in 1947 near the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea; between 1947 and 1956, some 900 manuscripts were found in 11 caves in this region.

- Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the earliest manuscripts of the whole Hebrew Bible dated from the year 1000 C.E. The scrolls were from 1,000 years earlier, allowing scholars to determine the accuracy of copies made in the Middle Ages.

- One important scroll is called the Rule of the Community. This is a description of how the Qumran community was to function and how its members were to behave and live together. This book also includes an explanation of the community's most important views about the end of time.

- Another interesting scroll is the War Scroll, which gives a description and a prescription of the 40-year war that will occur at the end of the age, when the Sons of Light will do battle with the Sons of Darkness and overcome them through the power of God.

- A number of individuals are mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls, but Jesus is not among them, and no one who is mentioned in the scrolls appears to correspond to what we know about Jesus. Further, there is nothing to suggest that the Essenes at Qumran had ever heard of Jesus. He does not appear to have been a member of their community.

- One of the things we learn from the scrolls is that the Essenes were principally concerned with maintaining their purity before God and making sure, through the rituals they observed, that they did nothing to offend God. Our earliest records of Jesus indicate that he was not at all concerned with ritual purity; instead, he was concerned that people live ethical lives before God. Such differences don't mean, however, that the scrolls are unimportant for understanding the historical Jesus.

History of Israel

- The time in which the Essenes and Jesus lived was one of foreign oppression and domination. On and off for centuries, Israel had been overrun by various world empires: the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Syrians, and Romans. At some point, the Jewish

people wondered why, if God had chosen them, they were forced to suffer so much foreign oppression.

- Answers to this question were given by the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible: The reason the people of God were suffering foreign domination is that they had sinned against God and God was punishing them. If they would repent, God would relent, and Israel would once again be an independent state.

- At some point, however, this view of the Prophets no longer made sense. The people of Israel were doing their best to keep the Torah and the Law, yet they still suffered oppression. A view developed among some Jewish thinkers that evil forces existed in the world that were aligned against God and his people. In this view, the people of God were not suffering because they had broken God's Law, but because they kept it. The powers of evil were out to destroy them because they were on the side of God.

- According to this ancient view, this situation would not last long because God was soon going to intervene in history, overthrow the forces of evil, and bring in his good kingdom on earth, in which people could follow his Law in peace and prosperity. There would be a world of justice, with no more hatred, war, pain, or suffering. This end was to come very soon.

- This is the view, known as Jewish apocalypticism, found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Interestingly enough, it's a view that is also found in some of the gospels of the New Testament on the lips of Jesus.

Jewish Apocalypticism

- Jewish apocalypticists subscribed to four major tenets, the first of which was dualism, a belief that there were two fundamental components of reality: the forces of good and the forces of evil. The forces of good have as their head God himself; the forces of evil have a personal counterpart to God, the devil.

- Throughout most of the Hebrew Bible, there's no word of the devil or Satan. When Satan appears in the Hebrew Bible, for example, in the Book of Job, he's not an evil force that's opposed to God but one of God's advisors. By the time of the Jewish apocalypticists, however, God had a personal enemy in Satan.

- The world was not just a place where humans lived, but one where supernatural powers were in constant conflict. People had to side either with good and God or with evil and the devil.

- This cosmic dualism worked itself out in a historical scenario so that history itself was understood to be dualistic. The historical age in which people were living was controlled by the forces of evil. That's why there was so much pain and suffering in the world—because forces that are inimical to God were in control. But in the future, God would destroy the forces of evil and bring in his good kingdom.

- The second major tenet of apocalypticism was pessimism about the possibilities of life in this world. Apocalypticists believed that things were not going to get better; the forces of evil were gaining power and would continue to rule until the end of the age, when, literally, all hell would break loose.

- The third tenet was vindication: God would ultimately vindicate himself and his people. He would intervene in the course of affairs to destroy the forces of evil. We should not think that we can improve our lot in this world and build ourselves into the kingdom of God. The kingdom would be brought by an act of God at the end of the age. At that time, everything that had sided with evil and everything that was evil, including people, would be judged and destroyed.
  - When God intervened, there would be a resurrection, an idea that was also developed by Jewish thinkers at this time. The future resurrection of the dead was meant to explain why there was so much suffering in this world among righteous people.

- At the end of time, all people would be raised from the dead, and if they had sided with God and suffered as a result, they would be rewarded. If they had sided with the powers of evil, they would be judged and annihilated.

- The fourth tenet was imminence. Jewish apocalypticists believed that they were living at the end of time; God would intervene very soon to overthrow the forces of evil. This was a message of hope for people who were suffering: Hold on just a little while longer, and God's intervention will come.

- Many people today continue to hold apocalyptic views to some extent. Within Christian evangelicalism and fundamentalism, it's widely thought that Jesus will return soon in fulfillment of prophecies. Indeed, in every generation of Christians, there have been those who maintained that the end was imminent.
  - Christians who have held this belief have two things in common: They have all based their views on the Bible, and they have all been completely wrong. But we can trace the expectation that we are living at the end of the world to the beginning of Christianity and the apocalyptic Jews.

  - The reason for this is that the Dead Sea Scrolls were especially influential among early Christians. Even though Jesus is never mentioned in the scrolls, the views found in the scrolls—the Jewish apocalyptic idea—in many ways influenced later Christians who arose out of Judaism.

  - Many authors of the New Testament subscribed to apocalyptic views, just as the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls did, expecting that the end of the age was to come soon with the judgment of God against his enemies.

Suggested Reading

Fitzmyer, *Responses to 101 Questions on the Dead Sea Scrolls*.

Flint and Vanderkam, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*.

Vanderkam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*.

Vermes, ed. and trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*.

Questions to Consider

1. What strikes you as the most important features of the Dead Sea Scrolls?

2. Why might the apocalyptic views of the Dead Sea Scrolls be significant for understanding the historical Jesus?

Did Jesus Expect to See the World's End?

Lecture 5

There can be little doubt that Jesus has been the most influential person in the history of Western civilization. The Christian church, which in some sense started with his life and teachings, his death and the belief in his resurrection, has been the single most important religious, cultural, social, political, and economic institution over the two millennia since his death. Without Jesus, our world would be enormously different than it is today. Nonetheless, it has proved inordinately difficult to know what Jesus himself actually did and said, including what he said about the end of time. In this lecture, we'll explore what a critical reading of the gospels tells us about Jesus's apocalyptic beliefs.

Vertical versus Horizontal Reading

- Most people who read the gospels do so in the same way they read books: They start at the beginning and read to the end. An alternative to this vertical reading is a horizontal reading—placing the gospels side by side and reading across them. Reading the gospels in this way begins to reveal discrepancies between different accounts of the same event.
    - For example, according to the Gospel of John (19:14), Jesus had a last meal with his disciples; was arrested afterward and put in jail; appeared the next morning before the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, and was condemned to death; and was crucified after noon on the day of preparation for the Passover. The gospel is explicit that Jesus died on the day of preparation for the Passover.

    - Mark's gospel, which was written some 30 years earlier than John's, indicates that Jesus had a last meal with his disciples, but it's a Passover meal. Earlier, the disciples had prepared the Passover (on what would have been the day of preparation), and that night after sundown (on what would have been, by Jewish reckoning, the next day), they ate the Passover meal.

After that meal, Jesus is arrested, spends the night in jail, and is crucified at 9:00 in the morning (still considered the day of Passover).

- In Mark's gospel, Jesus dies on the day of Passover, but in John's gospel, he dies on the day before, the day of preparation for the Passover. Both gospels can't be historically accurate.

- A meticulous horizontal reading of the gospels reveals many discrepancies, some over minor matters and some over significant issues. For example, did Jesus ever call himself God? In John 10:30, he says, "I and the Father are one," but he never makes divine self-claims in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. If Jesus really called himself God, wouldn't these earlier accounts say so?

- We also find events recorded in the gospels that almost certainly did not happen. As we saw in an earlier lecture, the census under Caesar Augustus mentioned in the Gospel of Luke, which forced Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem, almost certainly could not have happened. If Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod, he could not also have been born during the governorship of Quirinius, as we also saw in that earlier lecture.

Critical Scholarship

- Because of these and related problems, scholars have had to approach the gospels from a critical standpoint. This kind of critical study began in earnest in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, principally among German scholars. In some sense, it reached a crescendo with Albert Schweitzer's 1906 book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.
  - Schweitzer shows that every generation of scholars had portrayed Jesus in its own image. In times when the educated elite did not believe in the possibility of miracles, Jesus was portrayed as one who did not perform miracles. In times when the educated elite had a strong social agenda, Jesus was portrayed as having a strong social agenda.

- In Schweitzer's view, Jesus was best understood as an apocalyptic prophet, holding the same views about the forces of good battling the forces of evil and the imminence of God's judgment that we discussed earlier. The majority of modern scholars agree with Schweitzer.

- Several other basic conclusions about the gospels are now commonplace among scholars: The gospels were written decades after the events they narrate, none was written by an eyewitness, and all are based on oral traditions that changed in the process of retelling.
  - In looking for the true teachings of Jesus, scholars typically focus on those that are found in the earliest sources and in multiple sources, those that present dissimilar views from early Christians (likely to be true because early Christians would not have wanted to attribute them to Jesus), and those that fit well in Jesus's historical context.

  - Taking into account these factors, it appears to most scholars that Jesus preached an apocalyptic message: that God was soon going to intervene and overthrow the forces of evil to bring in a good kingdom.

Jesus's Apocalyptic Message

- An apocalyptic message fits in well with Jesus's own historical context of the 20s in Roman Palestine. It's the message taught by the Dead Sea Scrolls and found in the earliest surviving sources, including Matthew, Mark, and Luke; interestingly, Jesus does not preach this message in the later sources, such as John or the Gospel of Thomas. Further, this message is found throughout the earliest sources independently of one another, and some aspects of the message are not what Christians would have made up and placed on Jesus's lips.

- The principle message of Jesus was about the coming kingdom of God. In his first recorded words in any written material, Mark 1:15, Jesus says, "The time has been fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the good news."

- This statement seems to encapsulate a true teaching of Jesus. To say that the time is at hand means that a certain amount of time has been allotted to this age, the age of evil. The end is coming very soon, and people need to repent and prepare for the coming kingdom.

- Jesus further taught that this kingdom of God was to be brought by a figure he called the Son of man (Mark 8:38): "Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of that one, the Son of man will be ashamed when he comes on the clouds of heaven in the presence of the holy angels."
    - In modern thinking, the Son of man would be a reference to Jesus as a human; as Son of man, he's human, and as Son of God, he's God. But in ancient Judaism, the interpretation was just the opposite.

    - Among ancient Jews, the Son of God was a term used for the king of Israel, such as King Solomon, who was the Son of God not because he was God, but because he was the human chosen by God. If Jesus is the Son of God for ancient Judaism, he's the human chosen by God.

    - The Son of man was a divine figure. The phrase is a reference to a passage in Daniel 7 in the Old Testament, in which a figure appears on the clouds of heaven to judge the beasts that have come from the sea to wreak havoc on the earth. Here, the Son of man is a heavenly figure who is given dominion over the earth and will destroy the forces of evil.

    - In the gospels of the New Testament, Jesus says several things about the Son of man, sometimes referring to himself and sometimes referring to another figure, as in Mark 8:38. His words in Mark do not seem to be something that Christians would make up and attribute to Jesus, which means that this saying was most likely spoken by him.

- When the Son of man arrives, there will be a reversal of fortunes. Those who have sided with evil and prospered will be taken out of

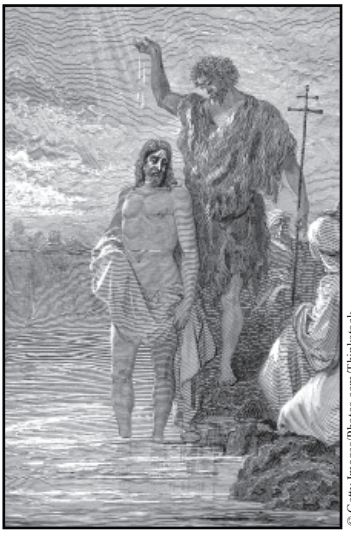
power. Those who are lowly and oppressed because they sided with God will be put into power. Jesus said, "The first shall be last and the last, first."

- Jesus then tells us how this reversal will come about. Those who want to inherit the good kingdom must have faith in God. They must put all their trust in God and love him with all their hearts, souls, and strength. Those who can keep this great commandment, from Deuteronomy 6, and the commandment of Leviticus 19:18 ("You shall love your neighbor as yourself") can expect the kingdom to be given to them. Jesus says that on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

- Jesus also thought that the kingdom was to come very soon. At one point in the gospels, he says to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, some of you standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come in power." In other words, some of the disciples will not die before the Son of man arrives. The kingdom would come in Jesus's own day.

Other Apocalyptic Messages

- It's not surprising that Jesus preached the world would end in his generation. This was the proclamation of the Essenes and the Dead Sea Scroll community and the preaching of Jesus's predecessor, John the Baptist. John tells his followers: "The ax is already laid at the root of the tree. Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and cast into the fire."



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John the Baptist, the predecessor of Jesus, also preached an apocalyptic message: When Judgment Day comes, those who do not "bear good fruit" will be destroyed.

- The apostle Paul, an immediate follower of Jesus, also believed that he was living at the end of time. The resurrection of Jesus signified for Paul that the resurrection of the dead had begun. Paul also indicates, in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4, that he himself will still be alive when the end comes and Jesus returns from heaven.

- Given that Jesus provides the continuity between the apocalyptic John the Baptist and the apocalyptic Paul, it's almost inconceivable that Jesus himself was not also apocalyptic. Like other Jews of his day and his followers since, Jesus thought that God was soon to intervene in the course of history to overthrow the forces of evil and bring in a good kingdom.

- The fact that the end didn't come in Jesus's generation caused enormous problems for early Christians, who had no recourse but to reinterpret Jesus's teachings. The imminent coming of the kingdom of God came to be understood as a teaching about heaven. But that's not what Jesus actually taught. He believed that a kingdom would be brought here on earth by the Son of man in an act of judgment on the forces of evil and that it would happen within his generation.

Suggested Reading

Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*.

Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*.

Questions to Consider

1. What would you consider to be strong evidence that Jesus anticipated the end of history in his own day?

2. If Jesus was wrong in his apocalyptic predictions, does that, in your opinion, invalidate his entire message?

How Close Were Jesus and Mary Magdalene?

Lecture 6

Some people acquire most of their historical knowledge from popular novels and film. For many such people, based on Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* or the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Mary Magdalene must have been Jesus's closest disciple. This idea also allows modern authors to spice up the story of Jesus, but is it based on reliable historical information? In this lecture, we'll see that in one respect, Mary Magdalene can be thought of as enormously important to Christianity but not for the reasons found in modern movies and novels. We'll look at the widespread perception of Mary Magdalene today and consider how she was portrayed in the noncanonical gospels and the gospels of the New Testament.

Was Mary Magdalene a Prostitute?

- The perception of Mary Magdalene today is that she was a prostitute who accompanied Jesus on his journeys, along with his 12 disciples. This view is found throughout popular culture, but it does not come from the New Testament, which says nothing at all about Mary's sexual activities. The idea that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute is a later church tradition that we can trace fairly precisely.

- In 591 C.E., Pope Gregory the Great preached a famous sermon in which he talked about several of the women known from the stories of Jesus and claimed that, in fact, they were all the same woman.
    - The first woman Gregory the Great discussed initially appears in Luke 7:36: "This is a woman of ill repute who anointed Jesus." We're told that one of the Pharisees had asked Jesus to eat a meal with him. A woman in the city who had learned that Jesus was in the Pharisee's house came there, bathed Jesus's feet with her tears, and anointed them.

    - The Pharisee tells Jesus that if he were really a prophet, he would know that this woman is a sinner. He does not say that she is a prostitute, and indeed, she may have been merely unscrupulous

in following the Torah. In later interpretations of this passage, the woman has come to be thought of as a prostitute.

- In response, Jesus tells the Pharisee a parable, illustrating that those who have sinned the most are most grateful when they're forgiven.

- Gregory the Great insisted that this unnamed woman in Luke's gospel is Mary Magdalene.

- The second woman in Gregory's 591 sermon appears in John 7–8. Jewish leaders bring before Jesus a woman who has been caught in the act of adultery; according to the Law of Moses, they say, this woman is to be stoned to death.
  - The Jewish leaders have set a trap for Jesus: If he agrees that the woman should be stoned, he will break his own teachings of love, forgiveness, and mercy. If he says the woman should be let go, he will break the Law of Moses.

  - Of course, Jesus says, "Let the one without sin among you be the first to cast a stone," and the Jewish leaders leave one by one, feeling guilty for their own sins. When only the woman is left, Jesus says, "Is there no one left to condemn you?" She replies, "No, Lord, no one." And Jesus says, "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more."

  - Again, the woman is unnamed in the gospels, but Gregory the Great claimed that she was the same woman who anointed Jesus's feet in Luke and that both women were Mary Magdalene.

- Mary Magdalene is referred to in Luke 8:1–3 and John 20. In Luke 8, we're told that she accompanied Jesus on his journeys and had had seven demons cast out of her. Gregory maintained that these demons had led Mary into sin and that she was the adulterous woman, who was also the prostitute who anointed Jesus's feet. The result was a

conflation of these three stories, two from Luke and one from John, but the three women are not linked in the New Testament.

The Gospel of Mary

- In other gospels from early Christianity, Mary Magdalene is assigned a significant role in Jesus's ministry. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Gospel of Mary. This incomplete gospel was discovered at the end of the 19th century, although it was not published and made available for scholars to examine until the mid-20th century.

- The Gospel of Mary begins in the middle of a teaching of Jesus, in which Jesus is giving a revelation to his disciples on the question of whether or not the material world will be destroyed.
    - After Jesus gives this revelation, he leaves, presumably returning to heaven. The disciples are upset at his departure, but Mary Magdalene comes before them and tells them not to be aggrieved, that Jesus will still be with them.

    - Peter asks Mary to tell the disciples what Jesus had revealed to her because, Peter says, "Jesus loved you more than all other women." When she concludes her description of the revelation (part of which is missing), the male disciples have trouble believing that Jesus would have revealed such a thing to a woman and not to them. But the apostle Levi affirms that Jesus loved Mary more than he did the male disciples.

The New Testament on Mary

- To the surprise of many people, in the gospels of the New Testament, Mary Magdalene is mentioned in company with Jesus only once in his public ministry. This passage is Luke 8:1–3, in which we're told that Jesus was traveling through the cities and towns of Galilee, and "the twelve were with him [the disciples], as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities. Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna and many others who provided them out of resources."

- Notice that Mary is not mentioned as the most important disciple or even as one of the disciples, and she's not mentioned by herself. She is with a host of other women, all of whom are all supporting Jesus and the disciples out of their own means. We don't know anything about these women, except that they must have had some wealth.

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The name Magdalene comes from the town in which Mary was born, Magdala, meaning "town of the tower."

- It's important to note that Mary is just one of three women named here, and the three are part of a larger band. There is nothing here that connects her particularly to Jesus. Again, this is the only reference to Mary Magdalene in Jesus's entire public ministry in the gospels. Based on these earliest reports, it doesn't seem as if Mary Magdalene was Jesus's closet disciple.

- The most important connection between Mary Magdalene and Jesus is what happens at the end of Jesus's life. We are told that in addition to the disciples who accompanied Jesus on his final trip to Jerusalem, some women accompanied him, including Mary Magdalene. We're also told that women, not men, were the ones who discovered the empty tomb three days after Jesus's crucifixion.
  - Mark 16 tells us that Mary Magdalene was one of three women who went to Jesus's tomb to anoint his body on the day after the Sabbath. Inside the tomb, the women find a man who tells them that Jesus has been raised from the dead; they are

to tell the disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee. But according to the last lines of Mark's gospel, the women are so afraid that they tell no one.

- This ending must have seemed abrupt to the other gospel writers. In Matthew and Luke, the women go to the tomb, learn that Jesus was raised, and tell the disciples.

- In all three of these gospels, Mary is one of the women who goes to the tomb, but in the Gospel of John, she goes by herself (John 20). When she discovers the tomb is empty, she runs and tells Simon Peter and another disciple. As Mary stands outside the tomb, Jesus appears to her and asks why she is weeping. At first, she doesn't recognize him, but when she does, she addresses him as Rabboni, "teacher." Jesus instructs her to tell the disciples that he has been raised, which she does.

- Was it Mary Magdalene who discovered that the tomb was empty, and was it she who first proclaimed that Jesus was raised from the dead? If that's the case and if Christianity is the belief that Jesus was raised from the dead, one could argue that Mary Magdalene was the one who started Christianity. That would make her incredibly important to Christianity, but it would not mean that she was Jesus's closest disciple during his lifetime; there's a significant difference between the two propositions.
  - In one case—possibly the historical scenario—Mary is the one who begins the proclamation of Jesus's resurrection. In the other case, she's one who accompanies Jesus during his entire ministry and is his closest disciple, but we have no evidence for this.

  - Jesus's male disciples are quite prominent in his public ministry. All the gospels and Paul tell us that Jesus called the 12 disciples. The gospels firmly attest that Jesus proclaimed his 12 disciples would sit on 12 thrones in the future kingdom of God, ruling the 12 tribes of Israel. The rulers of the future kingdom would be men, not women, not Mary Magdalene.

- It remains true, however, that Jesus associated with women to some extent in his ministry. We have, for example, the story of his private discussion with the woman at the well, to whom he reveals himself as the messiah (John 4). Given the patriarchal nature of the society, Jesus's public association with women may have been unusual in his day.
    - It's interesting to note that women continued to be important in the early Christian church. The apostle Paul, our earliest Christian author, is sometimes mislabeled as a misogynist (an assessment based on letters that he almost certainly did not write), but his writings discuss several women who are church leaders. In fact, in the early Christian churches associated with Paul, the place of women is so prominent that Paul writes, "In Christ there is neither male nor female."

    - Such writings have led scholars to suggest that women had a prominent role in churches in the time of Paul because they had a prominent role in the days of Jesus. The reality is, however, that Jesus spent almost all of his time with the male disciples. We have no account of his spending any time privately with women in his public ministry, not even Mary Magdalene.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*.

———, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code*.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think it is likely that women were actively involved in the public ministry of Jesus?

2. What do you suppose drives the modern tendency to see Jesus as having a close personal relationship with Mary Magdalene?

Was Jesus Married?

Lecture 7

In recent years, it has become popular to suggest not only that Jesus had close female followers but that he was actually married to one of them. Mary Magdalene, of course, is the usual suspect. This view is put forth in such popular films as *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Many people are convinced that even though such portrayals of Jesus are fictional, some kind of fact must linger behind them. In this view, it would have been highly unusual for Jewish men to be unmarried; thus, naturally, Jesus was married. In this lecture, we'll learn whether it's true that Jewish men were always married and whether, in fact, Jesus himself was married.

The Gospel of Philip

- The Gospel of Philip was discovered in modern times in Nag Hammadi. Two passages in this gospel that briefly describe Jesus's relationships with women have been taken to indicate that he may have been married.

- In the first passage, we're told, "There were three who always walked with the Lord, Mary his mother, and her sister, and the Magdalene, the one who was called his companion." Some people have argued that the word "companion" here means partner or spouse, but in fact, it doesn't. Jesus associated with these three women, but there's nothing to indicate that Mary Magdalene was his spouse.

- The second passage is more intriguing because of what it says about Jesus in relationship to Mary Magdalene. Unfortunately, the manuscript of the Gospel of Philip is fragmentary, and parts of this passage are missing, but it includes the words "Mary Magdalene" and "kiss."

- The passage has been taken to indicate that Jesus had some kind of sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene, which would be a plausible interpretation outside of its own context.

- But the Gospel of Philip is quite clear that kissing is understood as a symbol for the delivery of a revelation. Because the word of God comes by being spoken, when one Christian kisses another, it means that the first is transferring the word of God to the second.

Were Jewish Men Always Married?

- People who claim that there was a law or religious ruling that a Jewish man had to take a wife do so on the basis of some statements in the Mishnah, a later book of Jewish lore and law. The Mishnah dates to more than 150 years after Jesus's death and forms the core of the Jewish sacred collection of texts known as the Talmud, which dates from about 500 years after Jesus. Scholars have long known that the Talmud's prescriptions are not necessarily an indication of what took place in reality.

- Among other things, commonsense historical realities tell us that the idea that Jewish men in 1st-century Palestine were required to be married is false. For example, in the ancient world, except in times of constant war, men far outnumbered women in the general population. So many women died in childbirth that it would have been impossible for every man to be married.

- Further, we know of men in antiquity who were not married, especially among Jews and especially among Jews who had an apocalyptic worldview, such as the one proclaimed by Jesus. Sources tell us that the Essenes were a community of unmarried men who maintained an ascetic lifestyle, punishing the body to make the soul more open to what could be revealed to it from the higher realm.
  - The ascetic lives the Essenes lived were probably not unrelated to the fact that they were unmarried. Ascetics throughout Jewish and Christian history have insisted that people avoid the

pleasures of the flesh; thus, the natural tendency for rigorous ascetics was to remain unmarried.

- Recall that these Jews came from about the same time and place as Jesus did. Jesus, like the Essenes, was an apocalypticist who devoted himself to the coming kingdom and maintained that one's entire focus should be on the kingdom, not on life and its pleasures in the here and now. It's not at all implausible that Jesus, like the Essenes, was unmarried.

Paul's Views on Marriage

- The apostle Paul was not a disciple of Jesus. A zealous Jew, Paul was originally opposed to the Christian mission and message. He initially believed that the Christian claim that Jesus—a seemingly powerless figure—was the messiah was blasphemous.

- But then, Paul had a revelation; he came to think that Jesus was not the one who would save Israel from its foreign oppressors, but the one who would save all people from their sins. Paul believed that Jesus's death was a sacrifice to God that made people right with God, and his resurrection showed that he would soon return in judgment on the earth to destroy the forces of evil and set up God's kingdom.

- In several passages in his letters, Paul makes it quite clear that Jesus is returning soon and that people need to prepare for the judgment. Paul was so convinced of the imminence of this event that he urged his followers to be completely committed to the coming kingdom, so much so that they were not to change their social status.

- This exhortation becomes clear in 1 Corinthians, in which Paul tells people who are married that because the end is coming soon, they should not seek to change their status.
  - In view of the impending crisis, Paul advises his followers to remain as they are: "Are you free from a wife, do not seek a wife." Those who marry, Paul explains, will experience distress in this life, for which the appointed time has grown short.

- Paul continues: "From now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none." In other words, it is better not to engage in sexual relations in the present age given the fact that this age will end soon.

- Then Paul concludes: "The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord, but the married is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided."

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In 1 Corinthians, Paul tells his followers that his preference is for men and women not to have sex at all; if they can't restrain themselves, they should at least be lawfully married.

Marriage and the Resurrection

- A key passage regarding Jesus's views on marriage is in Mark 12, in which Jesus engages with the Sadducees on a question about the future life.
  - As mentioned in an earlier lecture, the Sadducees were a group of aristocratic priests who were in control of the Temple in Jerusalem. They did not follow the oral laws or doctrines of the Pharisees, and they certainly did not accept the views of the Essenes.

  - The Sadducees were very much in favor of the status quo. They accepted as their authoritative scriptures only the books of the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, which contain the Law of Moses.

- The Sadducees were in dispute over whether there would be a future resurrection of the dead, and Jesus engages in a controversy with them on this issue. The idea of a future resurrection is not found in the Old Testament but was a later view developed by apocalypticists.
    - The first time the resurrection doctrine comes into play is in the latest book of the Hebrew Bible to be written, the Book of Daniel. In Daniel 12, we're given an explicit reference to the future resurrection: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt. … People who are dead will be raised from the dead."

    - Because Daniel is not one of the books of the Torah, the Sadducees did not accept it. They did not believe in a future resurrection but in annihilation—simply the end of existence—at death.

- We're told in Mark 12:18 that while Jesus was teaching in Jerusalem, some Sadducees asked him his view about the resurrection. Not accepting his view, they posed a problem for him.
    - According to the books of Moses, if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, then the brother is to marry the widow and to raise the children on behalf of his brother.

    - The Sadducees asked Jesus: Suppose a man was married who had six brothers. The man dies and leaves a wife but no children; his wife marries the oldest brother. That brother dies without children, so the wife marries the next brother, and so on. Finally, the wife dies. In the resurrection, asked the Sadducees, whose wife will she be?

    - The point of the problem is to show Jesus how silly his view of the resurrection is, but Jesus has a response for the Sadducees. He says: "Is this not the reason you're wrong, that you don't know either the scriptures or the power of God? For when

they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven."

- In other words, Jesus says that at the resurrection of the dead, no one will be married, but people will live like angels. Life in the future kingdom of God is life without marriage.

Jesus's Ethical Teachings

- Jesus, as we have seen repeatedly, was an apocalypticist. He thought that the Son of man was coming on the clouds of heaven in judgment on the earth to destroy the forces of evil and bring in a good kingdom. In that future kingdom, there would be a perfect existence—no war, no hatred, no oppression, no disease, no poverty.

- Jesus's ethical teachings must be put in the context of this apocalyptic message. His ethics were not taught to show people how to get along over the long term or how to have a just society in the here and now. Jesus wasn't interested in the here and now because he didn't think the here and now was going to last.

- Jesus's ethics were a way to prepare people for the coming kingdom and a way to model the ideals of the kingdom in the present. If there is to be no war in the kingdom, then people should be peacemakers now. If there is to be no hatred in the kingdom, then people should love one another now. People should live in ways that reflect what the kingdom will be like when it arrives, and Jesus thought that in the kingdom, there would be no marriage.

- The conclusion is that people should not marry now if they are to reflect the ideals of the kingdom. And it seems highly unlikely that Jesus would have taught his disciples not to marry in light of the coming kingdom if he himself were married.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*.

———, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you suppose many modern people are so inclined to think of Jesus as married?

2. What are the strongest arguments, in your opinion, that Jesus was not married?

What Secrets Did Judas Betray?

Lecture 8

In this lecture, we move from considering controversies surrounding Jesus's birth and life to those surrounding his death and the reports of his resurrection. The focus of this lecture is on Jesus's most infamous disciple and one of the true villains of Christian history, Judas Iscariot, the man who betrayed Jesus. What was it, exactly, that Judas betrayed? The traditional view is that Judas betrayed Jesus's whereabouts so that he could be arrested without causing a wider disturbance. But scholars have disagreed on this point for at least a century. In this lecture, we'll look an alternative theory about the secret that Judas betrayed.

The Meaning of "Iscariot"

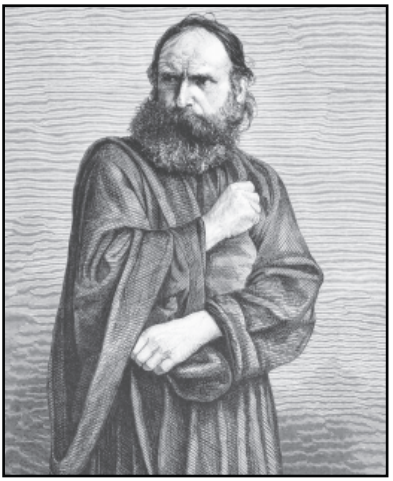
- Speculation about Judas Iscariot has been carried out not only in the halls of scholarship but also in novels and film, at least partially because this enigmatic figure has been widely seen as the most intriguing and puzzling of the New Testament. One area of speculation concerns his name.

- As we've seen, in ancient Judaism (and other cultures of the time), people did not have last names, which means that some other method of identification was needed. Jesus, for example, is often identified as Jesus of Nazareth. There are a number of people in the New Testament known as Judas or Jude, and in fact, Jesus had two disciples who were named Jude or Judas.

- The name Iscariot is obviously some kind of identifying feature about this man, but there have been significant debates over exactly what this feature is.
    - Various scholars have argued that it identifies Judas as someone who hanged himself, made money out of friendship, had a ruddy complexion, or was a member of the Sicarii, a group of Jewish zealots known to have assassinated Roman aristocrats or Jewish cooperators with Romans. None of these

theories has won many adherents.

- Probably the most common explanation for the name Iscariot is that it indicates Judas's hometown, which has been identified as Kerioth. We do not know, however, where Kerioth was or whether it even existed.



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Some scholars have speculated that Judas was a member of the Sicarii, "dagger men" who engaged in a kind of terrorism against the Roman Empire.

The Death of Judas Iscariot

- A good deal of speculation about Judas took place in the early church, particularly about his death. The common view today is that Judas died by hanging himself; this view is put forth in the one gospel that tells us about Judas's death, the Gospel of Matthew.
  - In Matthew, Judas betrays Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, but when he sees that Jesus is condemned, he repents of what he has done and returns the silver to the Jewish authorities. We're then told, in Matthew 27:5, that he departed and hanged himself.

  - The chief priests take up the money that Judas has left, but they decide that they can't put it in the Temple treasury because it is blood money—money that has been used to betray innocent blood. After conferring, the priests decide to buy a potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. Because the field was purchased with blood money, it was called the Field of Blood.

- The other three gospels don't mention anything about Judas's death, but there is a second reference to his death in the New Testament in the book of Acts, written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke.
    - Acts 1 takes place after Jesus's resurrection and ascension to heaven. The disciples come together and decide that they need to elect a 12th member because now that Judas has died, there are only 11 disciples.

    - Peter gives a speech on the need to hold the election, and in the context of that speech, he narrates how Judas came to his death (Acts 1:18–19): "This man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, and that field was called in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood."

- A horizontal reading of the accounts in Matthew and Acts reveals stark differences in the events of Judas's death.
    - In Matthew, Judas dies by hanging himself. In Acts, he dies by "falling headlong," perhaps falling off a cliff.

    - In both accounts, Judas's death is related to the Field of Blood, but the ownership of the field and the source of the name differ significantly.

- The two accounts, even though they're at odds on major points, also agree on several things. There was a field in or outside of Jerusalem that had red clay (which would have been used by potters). It's likely that the field originally got its name from the color of the clay, which looked similar to blood. Somehow this field was associated with the death of Judas Iscariot, by hanging, by diving off a cliff, or by some other means.

Stories outside the New Testament

- Among the most interesting stories we have about Judas's death from outside the New Testament is one in the writings of the 2nd-century church father Papias. He wrote around the year 130 C.E.,

40 or 50 years after the gospels, based on oral traditions he had heard. According to Papias, Judas went about in this world as a great model of impiety. He eventually became so enormous that he simply blew up.

- Another interesting story comes from the Gospel of Nicodemus. After he betrayed Jesus, Judas went home to find some rope to hang himself. He finds his wife cooking a chicken over a fire and asks her where he can find some rope.
    - Judas explains that he must kill himself because he has betrayed Jesus, who is going to rise from the dead, and Judas will have to face judgment.

    - Judas's wife says that Jesus is no more likely to rise from the dead than is the chicken she is roasting, whereupon the chicken immediately rises up. Judas runs off and hangs himself.

The Historical Judas

- These stories from the early church are interesting, but they obviously have no historical credence. Apart from later speculations about what happened to Judas, what can we say with relative certainty about the man himself?

- First, there is no doubt that Judas actually existed. We find him referred to in a number of sources independently of one another, and it's widely thought that no Christian would make up the idea that a man named Judas betrayed Jesus because that would mean that Jesus had little authority over his close disciples.

- Judas probably also did betray Jesus, which would mean that he was a Jew from Palestine who was a follower of Jesus. He would have been an apocalypticist because he was following an apocalyptic teacher.

- The gospels don't agree on why Judas carried out his betrayal. In Matthew's gospel, he does it for the money. In Luke's gospel, the devil entered Judas and made him betray Jesus. In the Gospel of

John, Judas himself is a devil. Over the years, many people have speculated about why Judas did what he did. Was he disgruntled because Jesus wasn't a violent messiah, bent on overthrowing the Roman enemy? Did he hope to jumpstart the revolution by betraying Jesus?

What Was Judas's Betrayal?

- We will never know for certain why Judas did what he did, but we may be able to know exactly what he did. What was it that Judas betrayed? To find an answer to that question, we need to think through a number of facts surrounding the death of Jesus.
    - Jesus was executed by the Romans for calling himself the king of the Jews, not because he performed miracles and people were afraid of him or because he disagreed with the Pharisees. The accounts we have are completely consistent: The Roman governor Pontius Pilate had Jesus executed for committing political insurgency. Jesus had called himself the king of the Jews and only the Romans could decide who would be king.

    - This charge of insurgency is leveled against Jesus in all of the gospels. Further, the title king of the Jews is not one that was favored by later Christians.

    - Ironically, in the gospels, Jesus does not call himself the king of the Jews. Why, then, was he killed for assuming this title?

- Again, we know that Jesus anticipated a future kingdom. Presumably, if there was going to be a future kingdom, there would also be a future king. When the end comes and the Son of man brings the kingdom of God, who would be the king?
    - Recall that Jesus had taught his apostles that they themselves would be rulers in the kingdom; he says: "You twelve will be seated on twelve thrones in the Kingdom of God, ruling the twelve tribes of Israel."

    - This is thought to be a secure saying of Jesus because it isn't something that a later Christian would put on Jesus's lips.

Among the apostles was Judas Iscariot, and a later Christian wouldn't have Jesus affirm that Judas would be one of the rulers in the kingdom.

- Jesus taught that following his teachings would allow a person to enter the kingdom. He saw himself as the key to the coming kingdom of God. Even though Jesus did not teach in public that he was the future king, it may well be that he taught this in private to his disciples.
  - Undoubtedly, Jesus wouldn't proclaim in public that he was the future king because people would misunderstand him; they would think that he was the kind of violent messiah so many were expecting.

  - But Jesus didn't understand himself as a violent messiah. He didn't think there was going to be a violent overthrow of the Roman Empire. He believed that God was going to destroy the Roman Empire and bring in his kingdom. When he did, the apostles would be rulers in the kingdom and Jesus himself would be king.

- Jesus was killed on a political charge that was not founded on the record of his public teachings, but it's a charge that is completely understandable from his teachings to the apostles. Judas may well have betrayed Jesus's private teaching that he would be the future king. The traditional name for the future king of Israel, of course, is the messiah. When the Romans heard of Jesus's claim to be the messiah, they interpreted it in a political sense and did what they did to anyone who threatened Roman rule: They had him crucified.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot*.

Paffenroth, *Judas*.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the strongest arguments that Judas Iscariot was one of the 12 disciples and that he actually betrayed Jesus?

2. Why do you think Judas carried out his betrayal?

Did the Jews Kill Jesus?

Lecture 9

We've only scratched the surface of the controversies surrounding the life of Jesus, and there seem to be nearly as many surrounding his death. But there are certain historical facts about Jesus's death that are not up for dispute: Sometime around the year 30 C.E., Jesus was arrested on political charges in Jerusalem, convicted, and crucified. Even though it was certainly the Romans who executed Jesus, throughout history, Christians have claimed that, in fact, it was the Jews who killed him. This charge became the basis for later Christian anti-Semitism that continues to this day. The stakes for the question of whether the Jews killed Jesus are high; in this lecture, we'll look for a historical answer.

Melito of Sardis

- Not long after his death, Christians came to identify Jesus not merely as a human messiah but as an exalted divine figure, equal with God. By the end of the 2nd century, Christian authors claimed that non-Christian Jews were guilty of deicide. This view came to clearest expression in a rhetorically powerful sermon preached by a Christian bishop named Melito of Sardis at the end of the 2nd century.

- Melito's writing was discovered in the middle of the 20th century. His sermon, delivered on the occasion of Easter, the Jewish Passover, is rhetorically effective and powerful but also disturbing. In it, Melito gives an exposition of his understanding of the Exodus event found in the Old Testament, when Moses led the people out from their slavery in Egypt to deliver them to the Promised Land.

- Melito reflects on the passage in the book of Exodus in which Moses told the children of Israel that before they were to leave Egypt, they were to slay a lamb and mark the doorposts and lintels of the houses in which they lived with the lamb's blood. This was so that when God's angel of death came, he would see the blood and pass over those houses, visiting instead the houses of the Egyptians.

The angel would kill every first-born Egyptian in order to persuade the pharaoh to let the children of Israel leave Egypt.

- Melito preaches that the lamb was, in fact, Christ, the Lamb of God, whose blood brought about salvation. For Melito, even though Jesus had to die, it was inexcusable that the Jews were responsible for his death; thus, in several passages, Melito accuses the Jews of killing their own messiah: "God has been murdered; the king of Israel has been destroyed by the right hand of Israel."

- The anti-Jewish implications of this claim are both clear and frightening. The history of anti-Semitism is, in part, the history of Christians claiming that God hates the Jews for what they did to his son and that God, therefore, has sanctioned acts of oppression and violence against the Jewish people.

The Situation in Jerusalem

- All the accounts agree that Jesus was killed in Jerusalem sometime during a Passover feast. To make sense of his death, we need to understand the situation in Jerusalem at the time.

- Among the Jews, the power players in Jerusalem were the Sadducees, aristocratic priests who were in charge of worship in the Temple. The Sadducees had close ties with the Romans and believed in cooperating with them in exchange for receiving privileges of worship.

- Pontius Pilate was also an obvious power player. He was the Roman governor of Judea between 26 and 36 C.E. As governor, Pilate had the power of life and death, with no possibility of appeal. He was expected to raise taxes for Rome in Judea and keep the peace.

- Passover is an annual festival celebrated by Jews to commemorate the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt under Moses. In antiquity, Jews came to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast because part of the celebration involved sacrificing a lamb to God,

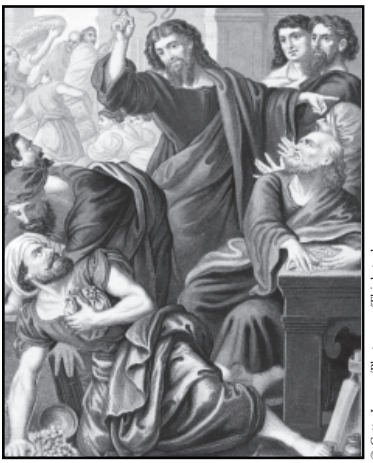
and the only place where sacrifices could be made was in the Jerusalem Temple.

- During Passover, the population of Jerusalem would swell many times over, creating what the Romans saw as an incendiary situation. The Jews were celebrating a past event in which God had intervened on their behalf and destroyed a foreign power, the Egyptians, who were oppressing the Jewish people. Many Jews believed that God would also intervene against the Roman oppressors. The Passover was the one time of year when the Roman governor would come to Jerusalem with troops in order to ensure that no violence broke out.

Events Leading to Jesus's Death

- According to the gospels, Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly. Crowds gathered and shouted acclamation, declaring him to be the son of David coming in the name of the Lord. Historians have doubted whether this actually happened. If Jesus rode into town on a donkey to the acclamation of the crowd that he was the future messiah, the Romans would have arrested him on the spot, but that didn't happen.

- Immediately upon arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus went to the Temple and caused a disturbance there. He overturned the tables of people who were exchanging Roman currency for Temple money and drove out people who were selling sacrificial animals. He may have thought that the Temple had become corrupt and that people were making money from the Jewish sacrificial system.



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Jesus caused a disturbance at the Temple in Jerusalem, where Jews had gathered to purchase sacrificial animals for the Passover feast.

- Scholars have recently proposed another explanation for Jesus's actions at the Temple. He had declared that the Son of man would soon arrive and destroy all of God's enemies. He may have thought that the enemies included not only the Romans but also Jewish authorities.

- According to Mark 13:1, the disciples of Jesus had marveled at the magnificent Temple, but Jesus had said, "Not one stone will be left upon another"—all would be destroyed.

- Jesus apparently taught that when the Son of man arrived, the entire Jewish system would be restructured, and those in power among the Jews would be taken out of power. It's not hard to imagine that this message caught the attention of the authorities.

- The Sadducees, who were in charge of the Temple and would have been the people that Jesus was opposing by his declarations, were led by the high priest of the Jews, a man named Caiaphas. Caiaphas and the other chief priests may well have become fearful of what would happen if Jesus continued proclaiming his message. Riots might result, and thousands could be killed. The Sadducees needed a legal charge to eliminate the threat posed by Jesus. Once Judas provided that legal charge, Jesus was handed over to Pontius Pilate.

- We don't know what actually happened when Pilate questioned Jesus. It's almost certainly not true that the trial was conducted in front of large crowds. Pilate probably had several cases a day in which he had to deal with people who were understood to be troublemakers, as Jesus was.

- When Pilate asked Jesus if he called himself the king of Jews, Jesus would have faced a dilemma. He did think that he was the king of the Jews, but not in the sense that he was going to lead an army against the Romans. As we've seen, he believed that he would be the king of God's kingdom. When Pilate asked him the question, he probably was either silent or said yes. Pilate ordered Jesus to be taken off and crucified.

Responsibility for Jesus's Execution

- It's important to note that the Jews did not kill Jesus; the Romans did. Saying that the Jews are responsible for Jesus's death makes no more sense than saying that because Pilate was a Roman, the Italians are responsible for Jesus's death.

- Roman soldiers flogged Jesus, mocked him, and killed him. No Jews were directly involved in the execution. But given that Jewish authorities handed Jesus over to Pilate, aren't they responsible? The Jewish authorities did not have the authority to condemn Jesus to death when Rome was in charge of the Promised Land. They handed Jesus over to Pilate for what probably seemed to them to be a very good reason: They were afraid of an uprising that could lead to many deaths.
    - The Jewish historian Josephus tells us about incidents during the Passover in which as many as 20,000 people were killed in riots led by zealous Jews.

    - The Sadducees didn't want the preaching of this Galilean prophet to cause a similar uprising; thus, they arranged for him to be handed over to Pontius Pilate.

- It's important to stress that the Jewish people did not reject Jesus. Most of the Jewish people at the time had never even heard of Jesus; even most of the Jewish people in Jerusalem had not heard of him before he came to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. Many of those who did hear of him were attracted to his message, which was, as we've seen, thoroughly apocalyptic.

- It was only a small group—possibly a handful—of Jewish leaders who found Jesus dangerous and handed him over to Pilate. They did not represent the views of all the Jewish people at the time, let alone Jews throughout all of history.

Suggested Reading

Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*.

Ehrman, *After the New Testament*.

Gager, *The Origin of Anti-Semitism*.

Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do you explain the increased emphasis throughout history that the Jews killed Jesus?

2. What, in your judgment, were the main reasons that the Romans chose to execute Jesus?

Was Pontius Pilate a Secret Christian?

Lecture 10

There are three traditional "bad guys" in the story of Jesus's death: Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus; the priest Caiaphas who handed him over to Pontius Pilate; and Pilate himself, the Roman governor who ordered him to be crucified. Throughout Christian history, two of these continued to be seen as evil opponents of Jesus and the God he represented—the two Jews. But the third figure, Pilate, the Roman who was not a Jew, experienced a character change over the course of Christian history. As we'll see in this lecture, even though Pilate himself was the one who ordered Jesus to be crucified, he increasingly came to be exonerated in the eyes of Christians.

The Historical Pilate

- Historically, we know very little about Pontius Pilate. We have some information from the 1st-century Jewish historian Josephus and some from the 1st-century Jewish philosopher Philo. From these sources, we learn that Pilate was the governor of Judea between the years 26 and 36 C.E. It's clear from these accounts that Pilate ruled Judea with a fist of iron.

- Josephus tells two important stories about Pilate that give us an insight into his character. The first comes to us in Josephus's book *The Wars of the Jews*. This is an account of what happened when the Jews rose up against the Roman authorities in the year 66, starting a rebellion that lasted more than three years and eventually leading to the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple.
    - Josephus tells us that when Pilate first came into Judea by night, he had the images of Caesar Augustus brought into Jerusalem; these were the standards for the Roman armies. According to Josephus, when the Jews saw the standards with an image of Caesar throughout the city of Jerusalem, they were incensed.

    - The Jews flocked to Pilate's palace in the city of Caesarea and begged him to remove the standards. Displaying the

image of Caesar was thought to be a violation of the Ten Commandments, according to which no images were to be worshiped by Jews.

- Pilate initially ordered his soldiers to kill a group of Jewish protesters who had refused to move from the palace grounds but then relented and had the standards removed.

- In another story, Josephus tells us that Pilate raided the sacred treasury of the Temple to fund the building of aqueducts for Jerusalem. Outraged, many Jews flocked to Pilate's presence in protest. Pilate ordered his soldiers to mix in with the crowd, concealing themselves in civilian clothing. They were then to beat the Jews who were protesting. Many Jews died from the beatings they received, and others were trampled in the ensuing riot.

Pilate in the Gospel of Mark

- The earliest account we have of Pontius Pilate in a Christian source is in the Gospel of Mark, the first gospel to be written. Pilate appears, of course, at the end, when Jesus has been handed over to him by the Jewish authorities, and Pilate puts Jesus on trial.
  - Jesus appears before Pilate, and Pilate asks him: Are you the king of the Jews? Jesus gives an ambiguous response: "You say so." The chief priest of the Jews levels many accusations against Jesus, and Pilate is surprised that Jesus has no answer.

  - We're told then that Pilate had a custom at the festival of the Passover to release a prisoner chosen by the Jewish crowds. The crowds cry for the release of Barabbas, a rebel who had been involved in political insurrection and had committed murder. When Pilate asks what he should do with Jesus, the crowd cries out, "Crucify him!"

- Some historians have questioned whether this episode ever actually took place. The trial of Jesus before Pilate likely occurred in private, not before a Jewish crowd. Further, Pilate had a reputation for being ruthless, yet in this account, to satisfy the crowd, he releases a

dangerous criminal. In fact, we have no record of Pilate or any other governor releasing political prisoners in order to satisfy a crowd.

- Barabbas may be a fictional figure. The name is Aramaic and literally means "son of the Father." The account may represent a symbolic choice for the Jewish people: Which son of the Father do they want, a violent insurrectionist who is willing to take up the sword against the Romans or the Son of God who is willing to die for the sins of the world? In this anti-Jewish account, the Jewish people choose the sword over salvation.

Pilate in the Later Gospels

- In the Gospel of Luke, written about 15 years after the Gospel of Mark, we find a similar account, but it's much expanded. Here, after questioning Jesus and receiving the same ambiguous answer, Pilate turns to the crowd and says that he has no basis for an accusation against Jesus. But the crowd is insistent that Jesus deserves to die.
    - In Luke's account, Pilate doesn't want to condemn Jesus. He finds out that the king of Galilee is in town for the Passover feast; this is Herod Antipas, the Roman-appointed ruler of Jesus's home in the northern part of Israel. Pilate sends Jesus off to be tried by Herod because Pilate wants nothing to do with the affair, but Herod sends Jesus back to Pilate.
    - Again, Pilate tells the crowd that he has found Jesus not guilty of the charges against him, but the crowd wants Jesus executed. A third time, Pilate asks, "What evil has he done?" and again, the crowd calls for crucifixion.
- The Gospel of Matthew was written at about the same time as the Gospel of Luke, and like Luke, it emphasizes that Pilate was innocent of Jesus's death and the Jewish crowds were guilty.
    - In Matthew, Pilate receives word from his wife that she has had a dream about Jesus, and Pilate should have nothing to do with this innocent man.

- In front of the crowds, Pilate washes his hands in a basin of water and declares that he is innocent of Jesus's blood. But the crowd cries out, "His blood be upon us and our children" (Matthew 27:25). In other words, the Jewish crowd accepts responsibility for Jesus's death and passes on that responsibility to their descendants.

- The emphasis on the innocence of Pilate and the guilt of the Jewish crowd is even greater in the Gospel of John. Here, an extended discussion takes place between Jesus and Pontius Pilate. As in Luke, Pilate declares Jesus to be innocent on three occasions and tries to force the chief priest of the Jews to accept Jesus's innocence. When the chief priest refuses, Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified.

Pilate outside the New Testament

- This heightened emphasis on Jewish culpability in the death of Jesus is continued in later gospels that are not found in the New Testament, such as the Gospel of Peter.
  - This fragmentary gospel begins in the middle of a sentence: "but none of the Jews washed his hands, nor did Herod or any of his judges. Since they did not wish to wash, Pilate stood up." In other words, Pilate had washed his hands of Jesus's blood, but none of the Jews would do so. In the next verse, we're told that King Herod—not Pilate—ordered Jesus to be taken away.

  - Later on, in verse 5, we learn that Herod delivered Jesus to the people, who pushed him about and mocked him. We're told in verse 17 that the Jewish people "thus brought all things to fulfillment."

  - In verse 25, after the death of Jesus, the Jews—the elders and the priests—realized the extent of their evil and began beating their breasts in woe. Because of their sins, they say, the judgment and the end of Jerusalem are near.

- A second noncanonical account is from the Acts of Pilate, a gospel probably from the middle of the 4th century. This gospel tells the events of Jesus's death from the perspective of Pontius Pilate himself.
    - In the Acts of Pilate, we're told that the Jewish people came to Pilate, accusing Jesus of many deeds. Pilate, however, wasn't convinced of Jesus's guilt. When Jesus was brought before Pilate, the soldiers, who were holding the Roman standards bearing the image of Caesar, bowed down to Jesus; in effect, Caesar bowed before Jesus, as well.

    - The Jewish authorities were incensed and unconvinced when the soldiers claimed that the standards had bowed down of their own accord. Twelve burly Jewish men were recruited to hold two standards, and Jesus was brought in again. Once again, the standards bowed in reverence.

    - In this account, Jesus is the divine king to whom all others bow down, but the Jews refuse to accept this fact.

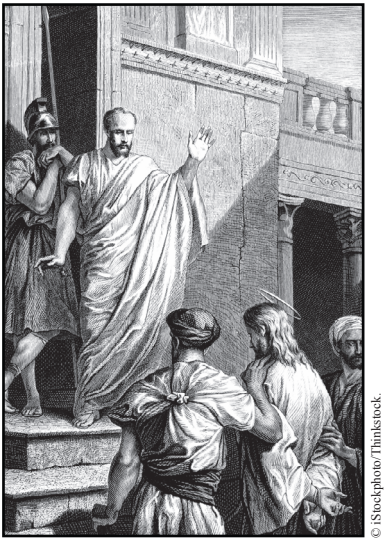
- From around the same time as the Acts of Pilate is another account called the Report of Pilate. This is a legendary account of a report that Pontius Pilate allegedly sent back to the emperor Tiberius after he had crucified Jesus, in which he explains what he has done. The report was invented by a later Christian author more than 350 years after the events it allegedly narrates.

    - Here, Pilate says, "The entire multitude of the Jews came together and handed over to me a certain man, named Jesus, bringing endless charges against him, but they were not able to convict him of a single crime."

    - In the aftermath of Jesus's death, Pilate says, all the synagogues but one were destroyed by fire, undoubtedly a punishment of God visited on the Jews for killing Jesus.

- Finally, the Handing over of Pilate is a narrative of what happened once Pilate's report reached the emperor Tiberius. Again, this

account is completely fictional, and again, it places blame for the death of Jesus on the Jews. Pilate is recalled to Rome, and the emperor orders his execution. But Pilate has become a believer in Jesus, and when the executioner cuts off his head, an angel of the Lord takes it to heaven.



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Christian storytellers claimed that after Jesus's death, Pilate converted and became a follower of Jesus and even a Christian martyr.

- Why was Pilate exonerated by later Christians? The answer should be obvious from the texts we've seen: If Pilate is made to look increasingly innocent, then the Jews are made to look increasingly guilty. But Pilate himself, historically, was not a secret Christian. Christians claimed he was in order to blame the Jews to an even greater degree in the death of Jesus.

Suggested Reading

Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation*.

Ehrman and Plese, *The Other Gospels*.

Questions to Consider

1. What do you think actually happened at Jesus's trial before Pilate?

2. What aspects of the gospel portrayals of Pilate, if any, strike you as historically implausible?

Was Jesus Raised from the Dead?

Lecture 11

Arguably, the most controversial claim of Christianity is that Jesus was raised from the dead, a claim that stands at the very heart of the Christian religion. If Jesus had been crucified and had not been resurrected, Christianity would not exist. Jesus would be seen as merely another prophet who suffered for what he said and did. But according to early Christians, on the third day after his crucifixion, God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to heaven. Unfortunately, the question of whether Jesus was resurrected is not one that historians can answer, but we can still subject certain aspects of the resurrection stories in the gospels to historical analysis.

The Miraculous Character of Jesus

- Throughout Christian history, there have always been believers who have appealed to physical proof of the miraculous character of Jesus's life and afterlife. These are the relics, the physical embodiments of power associated with Jesus's passion. In the Middle Ages, for example, it was widely believed that the cup Jesus used at his Last Supper, the grail, conveyed powers of immortality. Even today, there are Christians who believe that Jesus's image was indelibly imprinted on the Shroud of Turin as a sign to believers that he still lives.

- Although none of these relics have historical credibility, they reveal the need among some Christians to experience Jesus's presence after his departure from this life. In some sense, it is the reality of Jesus's presence that lies behind the stories of his resurrection, as well. These are accounts that indicate that Jesus survived the grave and was actually physically raised from the dead, never to die again. For these accounts, he continues to live.

- Unfortunately, the question of whether Jesus was raised from the dead can never be answered on purely historical grounds. If Jesus

was actually resurrected, it was a miraculous act of God, and miracles are beyond what historical evidence can demonstrate.

The Resurrection among Early Christians

- We've already seen that a variety of views about the afterlife were held in antiquity. Some Jews believed in the existence of Sheol, a place where everyone went after death, whether they were righteous or unrighteous, to live a kind of shadowy existence for eternity. Other Jews and many pagans believed in annihilation: that death was simply the end.

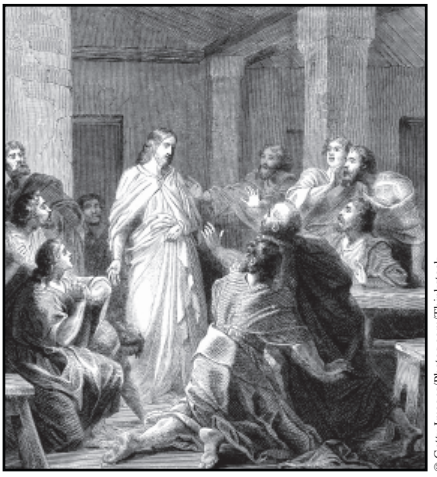
- Other people, principally apocalyptic Jews, believed that the afterlife involved a resurrection that would happen at the end of time. If these people came to believe that someone had been raised from the dead, it would indicate that this resurrection had started. This is why Paul and others thought that they were living at the end of time. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul refers to Jesus as the "first fruits" of the resurrection, an agricultural image that tells us that he believed others were to be resurrected very soon.

- The gospel accounts do not tell a consistent story about what happened after Jesus allegedly was raised. For example, the Gospel of John tells us that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb alone, but the other gospels say that she was with other women. According to Mark and Luke, the stone was already rolled away from the tomb, but Matthew indicates that the stone was rolled away after the women arrived. The gospels also differ on what the women were told to do, whether they carried out the instructions of Jesus, and whether and where the disciples saw Jesus after the resurrection.

- Even leaving aside the question of the miracle of the resurrection itself, which cannot be established on historical grounds, the gospels are completely at odds with one another and cannot be historically accurate because of their discrepancies.

The Resurrection in the Gospel of Peter

- One of the most interesting stories about the resurrection from later Christianity is found in the Gospel of Peter, discovered in 1886. Remarkably, this gospel actually narrates an account of Jesus's resurrection—something not seen in the New Testament gospels.



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In Luke's gospel, the disciples see Jesus after his death in Jerusalem; in Matthew's gospel, the disciples leave Jerusalem and see Jesus in Galilee.

- In the New Testament, Jesus is buried by Joseph of Arimathea immediately after he's crucified. The burial takes place on a Friday, the day before the Sabbath. On the Sabbath, because the Jewish disciples cannot do anything, they leave the body in the tomb. On the third day, Sunday, the women go to the tomb and find it empty. Here, there is no account of Jesus coming out of the tomb, no narration of the resurrection event itself. The gospels of the New Testament presuppose that the resurrection took place when they pick up the action on the third day.

- The Gospel of Peter, in contrast, actually tells a story of the resurrection. According to this gospel, the authorities posted a guard at the tomb to make sure that no one could steal the body.
  - While the guards are watching the tomb at night, they see the heavens split open and two angelic beings descend. As the angels descend, the stone in front of the tomb rolls away of its own accord. The two angelic figures alight, go into the tomb, and then come out, supporting a third person between them.

- After the angels and Jesus emerge from the tomb, there comes behind them the cross and a voice from heaven, asking: Have you preached to those who are asleep? The cross replies: Yes.

Historical Analysis of the Resurrection

- Even if the gospels and later stories are not reliable accounts of what happened, it must be true that something happened, because at some point, some of the followers of Jesus came to believe that he was raised from the dead. What was it that happened?

- It is commonly thought today that the reason the followers of Jesus believed in the resurrection is that his tomb was empty. But it seems unlikely that an empty tomb would make anyone believe that a resurrection had occurred. Further, it's not historically certain that there was an empty tomb. The first time we have a mention of women going to the tomb and finding it empty is in the Gospel of Mark, written 40 years after Jesus's crucifixion. We don't have any source near the time that indicates this story actually happened.

- In the gospels, Joseph of Arimathea, a secret follower of Jesus, buried Jesus after the crucifixion. According to the accounts, he was given special permission to take the body off the cross, so that it wouldn't remain there during the Sabbath, and give it a decent burial, but this goes completely against what we know about standard Roman practices.
  - The Romans would not have cared whether the body of Jesus was on the cross during the Sabbath day. Moreover, the typical Roman practice was to leave bodies on the cross to be subject to the elements and decomposition, to humiliate the corpse after death.

  - Why would Christians make up the story of Joseph of Arimathea burying Jesus? For later Christian storytellers, it was essential that Jesus was buried in a grave and one that people knew about. Otherwise, they could not plausibly claim that he had risen from the grave.

- Paul says nothing about an empty tomb, but he believed that Jesus was raised from the dead because he had a vision of Jesus after his death.
    - There has been a substantial amount of scholarship on visions and visionary experiences over the past 20 years.

    - Some visions are called veridical, meaning that they are visual experiences of phenomena that are actually present. Christians would claim that Paul's vision of Jesus was veridical, that Jesus really did appear to Paul.

    - Visions that are not veridical may be induced by chemical imbalance, fatigue, a sense of loss, or some other cause. Non-Christians would claim that Paul's visions were not veridical, that they were hallucinations.

    - Both Christians and non-Christians can agree that Paul says he had a vision of Jesus alive after he died.

- Paul also claims that others had visions, as well. The key passage is 1 Corinthians 15:3–8, Paul's account of Jesus dying and being raised from the dead. Paul says: "that he appeared to Cepheus [Peter], and to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

- What is a historian to make of this passage? Possibly, it's easiest to say that several of Jesus's followers had visions of him after his crucifixion. We have no corroborating evidence that 500 people saw Jesus; Paul is the only reference to such an occurrence. Possibly, some of Jesus's followers did have visions, and possibly, these followers of Jesus told others about their visions, who believed in the visions and passed the stories on. Soon, there was a snowball effect as people claimed to have seen Jesus alive after his death.

- People frequently have visions of loved ones after their deaths. These visions occur more often when people feel deep agony over a person's death, personal guilt, or anger. Often, these visions are taken to be veridical by the person experiencing them.
    - There are innumerable documented instances of people speaking to and touching dead loved ones in their visions, but normally, those who experience visions do not think that their loved ones have been physically raised from the dead.

    - The early followers of Jesus, however, did not share our common view of the afterlife, in which a person dies and goes to heaven. Jesus's early followers were apocalypticists who believed that at the end of the age, all dead people would be physically raised.

    - When these people had visions of Jesus, possibly induced from agony over his death, guilt, or anger, they naturally believed that he had been physically raised from the dead. And this led to two immediate conclusions: First, God had raised Jesus and made him his son, and second, the resurrection had started. Those who had experienced visions concluded that because Jesus had been raised, the general resurrection of all people was soon to come. For this reason, these followers of Jesus concluded that they were living in the last days.

    - The early followers were wrong, of course; time has continued to march on. But the belief in Jesus's resurrection has marched on, as well, and became the basis of the Christian faith held by some 1 billion people in the world today. The first followers of Jesus came to believe in it because they had visions of Jesus after his death.

Suggested Reading

Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*.

Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*.

Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Christ*.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think historians can marshal historical proof for a miracle, such as the resurrection of Jesus?

2. What do you see as the historical plausibility of both the existence of an empty tomb of Jesus and the claim that his followers had visions of him after his death?

Did the Jews Expect a Suffering Messiah?

Lecture 12

In the aftermath of Jesus's death, his followers insisted on four points: Jesus was the Jewish messiah; Jesus was crucified; therefore, the Jewish messiah was supposed to suffer and die; and the suffering and death of the messiah had been predicted in the Jewish scriptures. Three of these four points put Christians into direct conflict with Jews who were not followers of Jesus. All agreed that Jesus had been crucified, but on the other points, there were harsh disagreements. Non-Christian Jews insisted and, for the most part, continue to insist that Jesus was not the messiah, that the messiah was not supposed to suffer and die, and that scripture did not predict a suffering messiah.

The Anointed One

- The word *Christos*, from which we get the English word "Christ," is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *mashiach*, from which we get the English word "messiah." "Christ" (Greek) and "messiah" (Hebrew) mean the same thing. Christians so commonly and widely called Jesus the messiah that Christ eventually came to be taken as his actual name, even though it was originally a title.

- The Hebrew word *mashiach* literally means "anointed one," which is also the root meaning of the Greek word *Christos*. Why would anyone call a savior figure the anointed one? Understanding the answer to this question can take us a long way toward understanding why Jews and Christians never agreed on whether Jesus could be the messiah.

- When Israel became a kingdom, the ancient kings were anointed with oil to show that they were the ones who were especially favored by God. Thus, they were called the "anointed of God." The greatest king in the history of Israel was King David.

- In 2 Samuel, David wants to build a permanent temple for the God of Israel. After the Exodus, God had been worshiped in the tabernacle, a large tent, but by the time of King David, the children of Israel had been in the Promised Land for at least two centuries, and David thought it was time for God to be worshiped in a permanent dwelling.

- God, through his prophet, tells David that he will not be allowed to build a temple because of the sin that David has committed against God. God will, however, allow David's son, Solomon, to build the temple. In the context of God's refusal to allow David to build a temple, God indicates that he will build a house for David. This is not a literal house but a metaphorical one; he will give David a dynasty.

- The passage (2 Samuel 7:11–16) reads in part: "He [Solomon] shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a Father to him and he shall be a son to me." From this, we get the idea that the king of Israel is the son of God. The passage goes on: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." This is God's unconditional promise to David: An anointed one, a *mashiach*, will always sit on the throne of Israel.

- The descendants of David ruled Judah for 450 years, but in 586 B.C.E., the Babylonians destroyed the Judeans and removed the Davidic king from the throne. From that time on, there was no Davidic king ruling in Israel, despite God's promise. Some Jewish thinkers came to believe that the promise would be fulfilled in the future. In other words, the idea of a future messiah came about because the Davidic kingship was disrupted by the Babylonians.

Expectations for the Messiah

- Over the centuries, the views of a future messiah developed, expanded, and changed.

- From the Dead Sea Scrolls and other Jewish writings, perhaps the most common expectation we find for a future messiah is that he would be a future king like David, a warrior who overthrew the enemies of God to establish Israel once again as a sovereign state. This view, for example, can be found in a book written near the time of Jesus called the Psalms of Solomon, allegedly by Solomon but, in fact, not written for about 950 years after Solomon's death.

- Other Jews at the time of Jesus, however, expected a different kind of future messiah, a cosmic judge, sometimes called the Son of man, as we've seen in the teachings of Jesus. Still others believed that the future messiah would be a powerful priest who would rule God's people by interpreting the Torah for them.

- All these expectations had one thing in common: The future messiah would be a great and powerful ruler. There was no expectation of a future suffering messiah among the Jews prior to Christianity. Why, then, did Christians claim that the messiah was supposed to die for sins and be raised? Their logic was impeccable: Christians thought that Jesus was the messiah, and they knew that he had suffered and died. They concluded, therefore, that the messiah must suffer and die.

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For Jews who envisioned the messiah as a powerful figure, Jesus, who had been tortured and killed by the Romans, was anything but the messiah.

- To most Jews, this claim seemed nonsensical. Jesus did not overcome his enemies and establish a new kingdom in Jerusalem

as the messiah was supposed to do. Instead, Jesus was destroyed by his enemies—tortured and subjected to the most humiliating and painful death they could devise.

Predictions in Scripture

- Christians who believed that Jesus was the messiah and, therefore, that the messiah had to suffer turned to passages of scripture for support. They searched for texts in which a righteous person suffered and was vindicated by God. For example, Psalm 22 reads: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me? … For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shriveled. I can count all my bones. … They divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots."

- Even more commonly, Christians turned to Isaiah 53: "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his wounds we are healed."

- Christians believe that Isaiah 53 settles the matter: Scripture does indeed predict the suffering messiah. But Jews argue that this passage does not relate to the messiah; indeed, the word "messiah" never occurs in the text. Moreover, Isaiah indicates that the suffering has taken place in the past and the vindication will take place in the future.

- The word *mashiach* is not applied to the one who suffers in Isaiah. Rather than the "anointed one," he is called the "servant of the Lord." Further, Isaiah identifies this suffering servant.
    - This portion of Isaiah, starting with Isaiah 40, was written about 40 years after the Babylonian Captivity. In this passage, Isaiah indicates that the people of Israel can now rejoice. They have already paid the price for their sins; God is satisfied and will now return them to the Promised Land and restore his good favor to them.

- Who is the suffering servant? The clearest identification is in Isaiah 49:3: "And God said to me, you are my servant Israel in whom I will be glorified." The servant is a metaphor for the nation that has suffered or, more precisely, that part of the nation that has gone into exile and paid the penalty for others. The nation will now be vindicated.

- As when the children of Israel were brought out of Egypt during the Exodus, there will be a new Exodus from Babylon as people are led back through the wilderness to the Promised Land. God will ease the way for Israel; the valleys will be lifted up, the mountains and hills will be made low, and the ground will become level.

- Whatever Isaiah himself originally meant, there were no Jews prior to Christianity who thought that these passages referred to a future messiah. They were not interpreted as messianic prophecies until after the appearance of Christianity.

- Christians thought that Jesus was the messiah and if he was the messiah, then the messiah had to suffer. If the messiah had to suffer, then his suffering must have been predicted by God in the Prophets. Passages that discuss the suffering of God's servant are not referring to Israel, according to the Christians, but to the messiah.
  - Non-Christian Jews disagreed. For them, the messiah was to be a figure of power and grandeur: a great king like David, a cosmic judge like the Son of man, or a priest.

  - For the Christians, the messiah was first to be a figure of weakness who was tortured and killed by his enemies. But his death had a powerful effect because, ultimately, his death was the means by which God defeated the greatest enemies of all, sin and death.

- This battle over the Bible between Christians and Jews continues to this day. Some people say that the Passion narratives of the New Testament clearly show that Jesus fulfills scripture. In multiple

instances, what happens to Jesus is precisely what is said in the Old Testament: Jesus is silent before his accusers, is surrounded by evildoers, and says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

- As we know, however, the gospel accounts were written many years later by Christians who believed that Jesus fulfilled scripture. Naturally, they told their stories about Jesus in such a way as to reflect this belief.
    - As New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan has argued, it is not that the events of Jesus's life fulfilled what was predicted but that the stories told about his life were influenced by passages of scripture, so that later readers would see the echoes of scripture in these stories.

    - It's not that the Old Testament caused certain things to happen to Jesus in certain ways; it caused Christians to tell their stories about what happened to Jesus in certain ways.

    - Whether you accept this view or not, it's clear that Christians insisted that Jesus was the suffering messiah predicted by scripture, and Jews insisted, also appealing to scripture, that the messiah was not supposed to suffer.

Suggested Reading

Collins, *The Star and Scepter*.

Zedderholm, ed., *The Messiah in Early Judaism and Christianity*.

Questions to Consider

1. In your judgment, do such passages as Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 predict a future suffering messiah?

2. Do you think a messianic reading of these passages is completely: (a) appropriate, (b) acceptable, or (c) inappropriate?

Is Paul the Real Founder of Christianity?

Lecture 13

It comes as a shock to most people to learn that some scholars do not think that Jesus was the founder of Christianity. For these scholars, Christianity is not the belief in Jesus's message about the coming of the Son of man in judgment but the belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Christianity is not the religion of Jesus but the religion about Jesus. In this view, it was the apostle Paul who first promoted the religion based on Jesus's death and resurrection rather than on his teachings, and for that reason, it is Paul, not Jesus, who is the founder of Christianity. In this lecture, we'll consider the merits and shortcomings of this view.

The Life of Paul

- We have 13 letters in the New Testament that claim to be written by Paul, 7 of which virtually all scholars agree were actually written by him. Another source about Paul is the New Testament book of Acts, which is largely about Paul's life as a Christian. Scholars, however, question the historical accuracy of Acts, which seems to differ from what Paul says about his own life in his letters. Unfortunately, even Paul's letters give us little information about his past.

- From Galatians and Philippians, we learn that Paul was born and raised a Jew and, as a young man, was highly zealous, particularly, zealous before the Law. Once Paul learned about the Christians, he began to persecute them, probably in part because he found the idea ludicrous that a crucified man could be the messiah.

- Then, Paul had a vision of Jesus and became convinced that Jesus was alive again—that he had been raised from the dead. This conversion of Paul was arguably the most significant in the history of Western civilization.

The Forensic Model

- Some of Paul's beliefs remained the same after his vision as before, but of course, some of them changed and in a rather drastic way. Jesus was alive, and the only way for him to be alive again was for God to have raised him, which means that he did not stand under God's curse. He was, in fact, favored by God.

- How could Jesus be favored by God given that he had suffered such an ignominious death? Paul came to think that Jesus's death must not have been for anything that he had done wrong. In theological terms, Jesus did not die for his own sins. But if Jesus's death was in accordance with God's plan, then his death must have been for some reason. Paul reasoned that his death was for the sins of others.

- God's plan apparently was for his Son, Christ—the messiah Jesus—to die as a sacrifice for the sins of others. That means, though, that the divine plan is not to save people by having them follow the Law; instead, God saved people by the perfect sacrifice of Christ. Thus, Paul changed his understanding of what it means to be made right with God. Being made right with God had nothing to do with being Jewish and keeping the Torah. Righteousness can come to anyone, whether Jewish or Gentile, who believes in Jesus's death and resurrection.

- More specifically, after he came to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, Paul worked out a way of understanding how it is that Jesus's death puts a person right with God.
    - Paul understood the death of Jesus in a legal sense. In this way of thinking, Paul imagined God to be a lawgiver and a judge. God had given his Law to people, and people had broken it; everyone had sinned—disobeyed what God demanded.

    - In this legal analogy, the penalty for breaking the Law was death, and everyone had to pay the penalty. But Christ paid the penalty of death that others owed. Those who are willing to accept the death of Jesus as the payment for their sins can be right with God. They can have a restored relationship with God

by faith in Jesus's death. In the theological sense, faith means a trusting acceptance that Christ's death paid the price of sin.

- For Paul, the resurrection demonstrated that God was satisfied with the payment that Christ made, because the payment no longer needed to continue. Christ had died, and he no longer needed to stay dead. The resurrection proved that the payment had been accepted by God, and all people had to do was accept, by faith, this payment of their sins by Christ.

- This legal understanding of the act of salvation is sometimes called the forensic model. Sometimes, the main teaching of this model is abbreviated by calling it the doctrine of justification by faith. "Justification" here means being made right with God, and in this model, the person is made right with God by having faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Participationist Model

- Another model of Paul's for understanding how the death of Jesus could bring about salvation is the participationist model. In this model, the problem humans have is still the problem of sin, and the solution is still the death and resurrection of Jesus. But here, sin is not an act of disobedience against the Law of God; it is understood as an apocalyptic power that is in the world and is trying to enslave people. If the problem is enslavement to this demonic force of sin, then the solution must be liberation, and that's what Jesus's death brings.

- In this model, death is a power in the world that is also trying to enslave people, and when it does, it annihilates them. Jesus, though, conquered the power of death. Paul knows this because Jesus was raised from the dead; death was unable to keep Jesus in its grasp. And if Jesus conquered the power of death, he must also have conquered the power of sin. People can participate in Christ's victory over sin and death not by having faith but by being baptized.

- Paul believed that when people were baptized as Christians, they were united with Christ. Just as Jesus died and went into the earth,

the person being baptized dies, in a sense, and goes under the water; just as Jesus came out of the grave, the person comes out of the water and experiences a mystical union with Christ. What Christ experienced in his victory over sin and death, the believer experiences once he or she is baptized.

The Teachings of Jesus vs. the Teachings of Paul

- In both the forensic and the participationist models, the problem humans have is sin and the solution is the death of Jesus. Sin is either an act of disobedience or a cosmic power. People have either broken the Law or they're enslaved. Jesus's death either pays the debt or brings liberation. Salvation is appropriated either by having faith or by being baptized. In either scenario, Jesus's death and resurrection bring salvation for a person who is alienated from God.

- These teachings are a far cry from the teaching of Jesus. Jesus focused on the judgment of God that was to be brought by the Son of man, when he would destroy all the forces of evil in the world and establish a new kingdom with Jesus as the king. Anyone who wanted to enter that kingdom, according to Jesus, had to do what God demanded in the Torah.

- Both Paul and Jesus were apocalypticists, but there are major differences in their thinking. Jesus thought that the Son of man was coming from heaven and Paul thought that Jesus was coming from heaven. For Paul, Jesus is the Son of man, even though Paul doesn't call him that name; that's the function that Jesus has for Paul as the future judge of the earth.

- Jesus thinks that the kingdom will come to those who keep the Law in the way God wants them to. Paul thinks the kingdom will come apart from keeping the Law. Jesus did not preach about the salvation to be brought by his death, but Paul preached that salvation came only by Jesus's death. It's interesting to contemplate whether the two religions are even the same.

Who Founded Christianity?

- If Christianity is the religion based on the death and resurrection of Jesus, then isn't it fair to say that it was Paul, not Jesus, who started Christianity? There are problems with this view. Obviously, without Jesus, there could be no Christianity, because Christianity is based on Jesus's life and death. But Paul could not have had a religion if Jesus had not existed. Moreover, Paul himself tells us, in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5, that he inherited a good deal of his theology from others who came before him.

- Without question, Paul was extremely important for early Christianity. For example, looking only at the New Testament, 15 of the 27 books have to do directly or indirectly with Paul. Further, more than anyone else, Paul is the one who established churches in the Gentile realms of the Roman Empire.

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Without Paul's assurance that Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to be Christians, it's difficult to say whether Christianity would have succeeded widely in the Roman Empire.

- After Paul converted, he went on a mission to convert Gentiles to belief in Jesus. Because Paul believed that the salvation of Christ is not based on keeping the Torah, it didn't matter whether a person kept the Torah to have the salvation that Jesus brought.

- If a person could be right with God by following the Law, then there would be no reason for Christ to have died. If you were a Jew, you would keep the Law that God had given. If you were not a Jew, you could become a Jew. But the fact that Christ died showed that Christ's death was necessary, which shows that keeping the Law cannot make anybody right with God. In fact, Paul was quite insistent that Gentiles should not become Jews in order to be right with God.

- Ultimately, Paul's missionary work made Christianity a Gentile religion rather than a Jewish religion.

- Paul is certainly the most important Christian theologian of the early church; later theologians built their theologies on the ideas that Paul laid out in his writings, especially the letters to the Galatians and the Romans.

- Despite his importance to Christianity, Paul did not invent the religion, and he did not devise the idea that Jesus's death is what brings salvation. He inherited that view from unknown and unnamed Christians before him. Paul is best seen as the most outstanding and important spokesperson for the new Christian religion—its most important missionary and theologian—but he was not the one who founded Christianity.

Suggested Reading

Fitzgerald and Meeks, *The Writings of Saint Paul*.

Lüdemann, *Paul, the Founder of Christianity*.

Questions to Consider

1. What does Paul appear to have retained from his former beliefs once he converted to be a follower of Jesus?

2. Do you think it's possible to imagine Christianity being basically the same without the teaching and missionary work of Paul?

Did the Disciples Write the Gospels?

Lecture 14

As we have seen, scholars have long known that there are gospels from outside the New Testament, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Proto-Gospel of James, the Gospel of Mary, and the Gospel of Nicodemus. No one thinks that these other gospels were actually written by the persons named in their titles, but what about the New Testament gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? Matthew and John are two of the disciples, and Mark and Luke are traditionally thought to have been companions of the apostles. If these are the authors of the gospels, then their writings would be eyewitness accounts of events in Jesus's life and shortly thereafter.

Tracing the Attribution of the Gospels

- All four of the New Testament gospels are anonymous, but later Christians claimed that they were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As mentioned in an earlier lecture, the dates typically assigned to these books are as follows: Mark, 65–70 C.E.; Matthew, 80–85 C.E.; Luke, 80–85 C.E.; and John, 90–95 C.E. These books were quoted by church fathers over the next 50 years, into the middle of the 2nd century, but they're never called by name.

- The first author who calls the gospels by the names Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is a church father named Irenaeus, writing around the year 185 C.E.
    - Irenaeus is complaining about heretics who use just one or the other of the gospels. Some heretics use only Matthew or only Mark, and because of that, they have a skewed version of Christianity. In fact, Irenaeus says, we need all four gospels to have a well-rounded picture of who Jesus was. Further, according to Irenaeus, there must be four gospels—no more and no fewer.

- The four winds of heaven, says Irenaeus, have spread the gospel over the four corners of earth; therefore, there must be four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This first reference to the names of the gospels comes around the year 185, nearly a century after these books had been produced and circulated.

- Some scholars have suggested that we have an earlier attestation of the books going back to the apostles in the writings of the church father Papias, who composed his work around the year 130. Other authors quote the work of Papias as referring to gospels written by Matthew and Mark, which would mean the attributions came about 55 years earlier than Irenaeus. But nothing Papias says about Matthew and Mark seems to coincide with the gospels we have today; perhaps he was not referring to what we think of as the gospels of Matthew and Mark.

Were the Writers of the Gospels Literate?

- The Gospel of John makes no claims to being written by an eyewitness, specifically, the Beloved Disciple, whom many people have identified as John, the son of Zebedee. According to the gospels themselves, the disciple John was a lower-class fisherman in rural Galilee. His native language would have been Aramaic. It's extremely unlikely that this peasant would have been able to compose such a highly literate and theologically nuanced book as the Gospel of John in Greek.

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The gospels were circulated anonymously; to lend them authority, they were later attributed to apostles and companions of the disciples.

- The most persuasive study of literacy in the ancient world was written by a professor at Columbia University named William Harris, who has shown that at the best of times in Greek and Roman antiquity, something like 10 percent of the population could read and write. In other words, illiteracy rates were 90 percent or more in most times and places and would have been higher than 90 percent in rural areas.

- With respect to Palestine itself, the fullest study of literacy that's been done is by Catherine Hezser in her book *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*. Hezser shows that earlier views that all Palestinian boys learned to read in synagogue schools are almost certainly wrong. At this time, Hezser estimates that roughly 3 percent of the population of Palestine was literate, and this 3 percent was almost entirely upper-class people, living in major urban areas.

- Only upper-class people could afford the time and expense of an education, and only in urban areas was education available. The very low literacy in Palestine can be seen in the fact that we know the names of only two authors of Palestine from the entire 1st century, and only one of them has any writings that have survived, the 1st-century historian Josephus, who was a member of the elite.

- Moreover, those who were literate were literate in their native languages. In Palestine, literate people could probably read and write Aramaic and, possibly, knew how to read Hebrew, a related language. Other studies done by such scholars of Judaism as Mark Chancey have shown that in rural Galilee, the language was almost completely Aramaic. Few people could speak Greek, except in the major cities, and virtually no one from Galilee could compose literature in Greek.

- Perhaps most important, we have biblical evidence that John was illiterate. Acts 4:13 indicates that both Peter and John were *agrammotoi*, meaning that they didn't know their letters.

- Matthew, too, was probably a lower-class, Aramaic-speaking peasant from Galilee. Matthew was a tax collector, but that doesn't mean he had to be literate in order to keep accounts. Most tax collectors in the ancient Roman world were lower-class laborers who knocked on doors and demanded that money be paid.

- The historical Mark was also an Aramaic-speaking Jew from Palestine, almost certainly from the lower classes. He, too, could not have written an extensive Greek composition. Nothing in this gospel suggests, as some people have claimed, that this author was the secretary to the apostle Peter or was recording Peter's version of events.

- The Gospel of Luke is a somewhat special case because this author also wrote the book of Acts. In Acts, he speaks in four passages in the first-person plural. Traditionally, he was thought to be a traveling companion of Paul, whom Paul names in some of his letters as Luke the Gentile Physician. If Luke was a physician, then obviously, he was educated and probably would have been literate. But nothing in the book of Acts or the Gospel of Luke suggests that its author was a physician.

- The four gospels are anonymous and must remain anonymous. We don't know who the authors were except to say that they were highly educated, Greek-speaking Christians from decades after the days of Jesus. They were almost certainly were not among his disciples, who were lower-class, Aramaic-speaking peasants from Galilee.

Dating the Gospels

- Most scholars agree on the standard dates that we've discussed for a number of reasons. For instance, the apostle Paul does not seem to know any of the gospels. Given that Paul was so well traveled, it makes sense to think that the gospels were not in circulation, or he would show some knowledge of them.

- In addition, the writers of the gospels of the New Testament appear to know that the city of Jerusalem had been destroyed, an event that

took place in the year 70 C.E., at the end of the outbreak of a Jewish war in the year 66. When Roman troops marched into Palestine, they quickly conquered the land of Galilee and then moved into Judea in the south, laid siege to Jerusalem, and after three and a half years, conquered the city and burned the Temple.

- In Luke 21:20–24, for example, Jesus talks explicitly about Jerusalem being surrounded by its enemies and being trampled by the Gentiles.

- In Matthew 22:7, Jesus tells a parable in which a king is upset with people who had been invited to a wedding banquet but refused to come. The king sends out his troops and burns the city. This is a parable about Jesus being rejected. God, the Father, has a wedding banquet for his Son, but the Jews, the called people, refuse to come, so God burns their city.

Gospel Sources

- Almost certainly, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written from information from the oral tradition. After Jesus died and people came to believe that he had been raised from the dead, stories were told about him. In fact, the only way Christianity could spread was by people telling stories about Jesus.

- The religion spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire, with people who were not eyewitnesses converting others by telling stories about Jesus, and those new converts, in turn, passing the stories on.

- It's completely implausible to think that the apostles of Jesus were the only ones telling stories about him or that they were present to guarantee the accuracy of every story that was told throughout the empire. For the most part, the apostles probably stayed in Jerusalem, while the stories about Jesus passed between travelers, neighbors, relatives, and friends.

- Of course, there is no way to control what happens to stories in oral circulation, particularly when they are being told for the purposes of

convincing people of a new viewpoint, when they're being passed among hundreds of people, or when they're being transmitted from one language to another. The stories change in circulation; some stories may even be entirely invented. This explains why there are so many discrepancies, contradictions, and varying perspectives in the gospels.

- The attribution of the gospels to certain disciples and companions of the apostles was meant to give these books authority. Many gospels were circulating, and it would have been difficult to know which ones to trust. Some Christians thought that these particular books were trustworthy, and in order to enhance that sense of reliability, they connected the gospels with the apostles of Jesus.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *Forged*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you suppose the gospel writers chose to remain anonymous?

2. If the apostles really did write the gospels, would that make them historically accurate in your judgment?

Does the New Testament Contain Forgeries?

Lecture 15

In this lecture, we ask whether the New Testament contains forgeries, that is, books whose authors claim to be someone other than who they really are. We've already seen some forgeries in this course, including the Gospel of Peter, discovered in 1886, which claims to be written by Simon Peter, Jesus's closest disciple. As it turns out, we have numerous writings allegedly by Peter, including three apocalypses and several letters. We also have writings allegedly by Paul, Thomas, Philip, and even Jesus himself. In this lecture, we'll explore why people wrote such forgeries, whether these authors were considered to be lying, and most important, whether some of these early Christian forgeries could have been accepted into the New Testament.

Defining Forgery

- The term "pseudonymous" literally means "written under a false name." In some cases, authors write under a pen name, as Samuel Clemens did when he wrote *Huckleberry Finn* under the name Mark Twain. In other cases, authors write in the name of a known person, as Konrad Kujau did when he forged diaries in the name of Hitler. That kind of pseudonymous writing is called pseudepigraphy—"writing inscribed with a lie."

- There are two kinds of pseudepigraphy. Sometimes a book is pseudepigraphic by attribution, meaning that the author wrote anonymously, but later people ascribed the book to a known person. As we've seen, that is the case with the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The second kind of pseudepigraphy occurs when an author claims to be a known person that he or she is not. For our purposes, this kind of writing is a forgery.

- Some people object to using the term "forgery" with respect to antiquity, because they mistakenly think it was an acceptable practice at the time. Although writing under a false name was

common in antiquity, it was not socially acceptable. Those who discuss it condemn it as a kind of literary deceit, a form of lying.

- In Greek, the two most common words used to describe this practice are *pseudos*, which means a lie, and *nothos*, a word that refers to an illegitimate child.

- These books were called bastards because they did not belong to their alleged fathers.

The Practice of Forgery

- The practice of forgery was almost always condemned in ancient times, often in strong language. Sometimes the practice was even condemned in works that were themselves forged. An interesting example is the 4th-century Christian document called the Apostolic Constitutions, a book allegedly written by the apostles that describes how the church ought to be run and organized.
  - At certain points in this book, the apostles speak in the first person. With respect to the ordination of deacons, for example, the book says, "I, Philip, make this constitution." With respect to sub-deacons, it says, "I, Thomas, make this constitution."

  - What's striking in the Apostolic Constitutions is that the authors, claiming to be apostles, urge their readers not to read the heretical books that claim to be written by apostles but aren't. In other words, the author condemns what he himself did.

  - This condemnation of forgery was a ploy of ancient forgers to throw people off the trail of the forgers' own deceit.

- Some people have argued that it was common to practice pseudepigraphy in the philosophical schools without condemnation, but in fact, philosophers condemned the practice as much as anyone else. We know of no philosopher or head of any philosophical school from ancient times up to the 2nd Christian century who spoke approvingly of forgery.

1 and 2 Peter

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The book known as the Apocalypse of Peter, claiming to be written by the disciple, is the first example we have of a Christian author describing a guided tour of heaven and hell.

- We've seen already seen that there are several forgeries allegedly by Peter from outside the New Testament. In the New Testament, books 1 and 2 Peter are letters claiming to be written by Peter. But virtually every critical scholar agrees that whoever wrote 1 Peter did not write 2 Peter. The writing styles are completely different. In the opinion of many scholars, neither of these authors was Peter.

- One prominent reason for this assertion is that Peter himself almost certainly couldn't write. Like John, the son of Zebedee, Peter was a lower-class, Aramaic-speaking fisherman without the time or money needed for the years of study required to learn to write and then to learn to write in a foreign language—Greek.

- Is it possible that Peter dictated these books to a secretary, who then wrote them down? That would mean that Peter would have had to compose the letters orally in Greek. There is nothing in either letter to suggest that they were originally composed in Aramaic, and again, to compose orally in Greek would have required a high level of education, which Peter almost certainly did not have.

- Even if we assume that a secretary composed the letters under Peter's direction, recent scholarship has shown almost no evidence that a secretary would be commissioned to write a lengthy treatise in someone else's name in the ancient world. It's more likely that

these letters are by two different authors claiming to be Peter; in other words, they're forgeries.

Reasons for Committing Forgery

- We can point to numerous reasons for writing forgeries in the ancient world, including for money. Ancient libraries sometimes paid gold for original copies of Aristotle, Plato, and Sophocles, and not surprisingly, many original copies of these philosophers appeared once libraries began to pay gold for them. Earning wealth was a major factor in some times and places for committing forgery, but it doesn't apply much to such books as 1 and 2 Peter, which wouldn't have brought in any money.

- Sometimes books were forged in order to cast aspersions on an enemy. Ancient sources tell us of a philosopher named Diotimus who was a personal enemy of Epicurus. Diotimus wrote 50 offensive letters under the name of Epicurus and circulated them to put his enemy in a bad light.

- Probably the most common reason for writing forgeries in the ancient world was to get a hearing for one's views. Unknown philosophers who wanted their work to be widely read sometimes wrote treatises claiming to be by Plato or Aristotle, thereby gaining a wider readership than if they had written under their own names. Probably the reason that most early Christian forgeries were produced was so that people would read them.

- Gaining an audience was especially important in early Christianity given the fact that there were many different understandings of the religion in antiquity: many understandings of who Jesus was, what salvation meant, who God was, and so on. With this variety of views, some people wanted to set forth an authoritative understanding, and the best way to get others to accept one's views was to claim to be someone famous, such as Peter or Paul.

Tactics of Forgers

- Sometimes, a forger would simply assert that he was a famous person and he would be believed. In other instances, an author claims to be famous and tries to prove the point. We see this approach in 2 Peter 1:16–18, when the author claims that he was present with Jesus when Jesus revealed his glory to Peter, James, and John on a mountaintop. This event is called the Mountain of Transfiguration, and it's discussed in Mark 9.
    - Jesus reveals his glory to three of his disciples, and God speaks from heaven, saying, "This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

    - The author of 2 Peter claims that he was present to hear that voice: "We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven while we were with Him on the holy mountain." In other words, beyond claiming that he is Peter, the forger tries to prove that he is Peter.

- Sometimes, authors included other verisimilitudes to prove their claims. We find this strategy throughout the New Testament and in later Christian authors. The forger will simply write something, such as an instruction, that sounds just like what the claimed author would have said. Why would someone give instructions to the recipient of a letter unless the writer was really who he claimed to be?

- One common technique used by forgers was to try to imitate the style of the claimed author, as we find with authors trying to imitate a Pauline style.

Other New Testament Forgeries

- The gospels cannot be considered forgeries because they were written anonymously. Of the 13 letters of Paul in the New Testament, only 7 are undisputed. By comparing writing style, vocabulary, theological views, and the presupposed historical situation, scholars have also determined that Paul probably did not write Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus.

- The book of James in the New Testament claims to be written by James, the brother of Jesus. James, like Peter and John, was a lower-class, Aramaic-speaking peasant who would not have been educated, let alone educated to compose in Greek; thus, James probably did not write the letter. The same is true of the book of Jude, which allegedly is written by Jesus's brother Jude but almost certainly could not have been. Some people have argued that the authors of Acts, Hebrews, and 1 John want their readers to think that they are known authors, even though they weren't.

- Probably the majority of critical scholars believe that there are 10 forgeries in the New Testament, and some add 3 more books to this group. Up to 13 books—nearly half—of the New Testament may be considered forgeries.

- In a world that condemned the practice of forgery, how could someone justify this kind of lying? Some early Christians, including the church father Augustine, thought that it was never right, under any circumstances, to tell a lie. But others believed that there were times when it made sense to tell a lie, perhaps to get others to listen to an important message. This attitude may have prevailed among the Christian authors who produced the forgeries that are now in the New Testament. For these authors, the message they had to convey may well have seemed more important than the means they used to convey it.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *Forged*.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think the term "forgery" is too harsh for ancient Christian writings that were written by people claiming to be famous apostles?

2. What kind of evidence would you look for to establish whether an ancient writing (say, a letter of Paul) was forged or not?

Is the Book of Revelation about Our Future?

Lecture 16

Many people are interested in learning whether the prophecies in the book of Revelation are beginning to unfold. In fact, just about every generation of Christians from the time the book of Revelation was written until today has believed that it was the generation predicted in the book. But one thing we can confidently say about everyone who has predicted that the end of the world would come based on the book of Revelation is this: For 1,900 years, every one of them has been wrong, largely because Revelation is not a blueprint of the future. As we'll see in this lecture, the key to understanding Revelation is to understand what kind of book it is.

Background on Revelation

- The word "revelation" is Latin, a translation of the Greek word *apocalypse*, which means a "revealing" or an "unveiling." In Greek, this book was called an apocalypse because it was thought to reveal the heavenly secrets that could explain earthly realities.

- The book of Revelation seems strange to us today because we don't have books like it. To understand any writing, we need to know what its genre is, such as biography or mystery novel, and how that genre works. The book of Revelation may seem unique to us today, but it is simply one example of a common literary genre in the ancient world known as an apocalypse, a genre that conveys the worldview of apocalypticism.

The Events of Revelation

- The book of Revelation begins in chapter 1:1 by announcing what it is: an apocalypse or a revelation given through Jesus by his angel to a prophet named John. The book opens with a vision that John has of Jesus as the Son of man.

- John is told by Jesus that he is to write down certain things for his audience (Revelation 1:19): what he has seen, namely, the vision of Jesus as the Son of man; what is, namely, the state of the Christian church in his day; and what is to be, that is, what will happen in the future.

- John discusses the state of the Christian church in chapters 2 and 3. Then, in chapter 4, he has a vision in which he sees the beginning of what is yet to take place on earth. John sees a door open in the sky, through which he enters heaven. There, he sees God seated on his throne.

- God has a scroll in his hand that is sealed with seven seals. In the scroll is the future course of history on earth. Next to the throne is the Lamb of God, who has been slain—an image of Jesus. The Lamb of God begins to break the seals on the scroll, and every time he opens a seal, a set of disasters takes place on earth.

- When the seventh seal is broken, we're introduced to seven angels. Each angel blows a trumpet in turn, and afterwards, another set of disasters happens on earth. The sounding of the seventh trumpet introduces seven angels who hold enormous bowls of God's wrath that they pour out on the earth one at a time. In the midst of all these disasters, we read about the rise of the Antichrist on earth, the great beast that is opposed to God.

- When the bowls of wrath have been poured out, we finally reach the climax—the Battle of Armageddon, where Christ appears from heaven with his armies and slays the armies of the Antichrist, bringing in 1,000 years of peace on earth—the so-called millennia.

- At the end of the millennia, a final uprising by the forces of evil takes place that is put down at the Last Judgment. Then, at the close of the book, a new heaven and a new earth appear. A New Jerusalem descends from heaven, where the saints will live forever with gates made of pearl and streets paved with gold. The author ends the book by praying, "Come soon, Lord Jesus."

Features of Ancient Apocalypses

- Apocalypses tend to be first-person pseudonymous prose narratives. They are usually written by someone claiming to be a famous person from the past. The book of Revelation is different from most other apocalypses in that it is not pseudonymous. The author calls himself John, but he doesn't tell us which John he is.

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Revelation is one example of the ancient apocalypse genre and shares numerous features with other books of the same genre.

- Apocalypses contain revelatory visions or dreams that are often quite bizarre. Of course, Revelation describes all sorts of amazing visions. Perhaps most important, John is shown, through bizarre symbolism, all the disasters that will strike the earth before the end of the world comes.

- The visions in an apocalypse are mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient. In other words, there's almost always an angel present to explain the bizarre imagery to the person receiving it.

- Apocalypses tend to be of two types. Some of them are historical sketches of what will happen in the future—a sequence of events that is to strike the earth. Other apocalypses describe the seer's heavenly visions, and what he sees in heaven replicates what is happening on earth. The book of Revelation combines both of these types; the heavenly vision, in fact, indicates the history of what will happen on earth.

- Another characteristic of apocalypses is that they use violent repetitions, meaning that there are repetitions that violate a literal interpretation.
    - In the book of Revelation, the seven seals of the scroll are broken, each one leading to a disaster. Breaking the seventh seal leads to seven angels, each blowing a trumpet in turn and leading to a disaster. The seventh sounding of the trumpet leads to seven angels, each holding a bowl filled with God's wrath poured out on the earth and leading to a disaster.

    - We shouldn't think about these events in a linear fashion, along a chronological timeline. The point of describing disaster after disaster is to show that there will be many disasters. Violent repetition allows the author to make that point.

- Apocalypses are also designed to disclose transcendent truths, truths greater than this world. In particular, most Jewish and Christian apocalypses are designed to show that God is ultimately in control, even if that doesn't seem to be the case. These transcendent truths are meant to explain mundane realities, such as the presence of suffering on earth. Suffering exists because we are at the end of time and the forces of evil are at the height of their power, but God will soon triumph.

- Finally, apocalypses always come to us in a triumphalist mode. Good will vanquish evil, and then all will be good. The book of Revelation ends with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth to appear after this horrible world and its pain and suffering pass away.

- It may seem that the point of ancient apocalypses is to predict what will happen in the future. But biblical scholars have long recognized that, in fact, these books are meant to comfort those who are suffering in the present with the hope that in the end, all will be well. Apocalypses were designed to assure their readers that God is ultimately in control, even when circumstances seem otherwise, and that ultimately, good will triumph over evil, light over darkness, God over the forces of chaos.

Two Key Visions from Revelation

- The fact that the book of Revelation does not predict a distant future from its own time can be seen in at least two of its key visions.

- In chapter 17, one of the seven angels carrying one of the seven bowls tells John that he wants to show him the judgment of the great whore of Babylon, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication. With the wine of that fornication, the inhabitants of earth have become drunk.
    - The angel takes John into the wilderness, where the prophet sees a woman sitting on a scarlet beast with seven heads and 10 horns. The woman is clothed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold and jewels. She holds in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication. On her head is written a mystery: "Babylon the Great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations."

    - The angel explains that the seven heads of this beast represent the seven mountains on which the woman is seated. The 10 horns represent 10 kings who will make war on Christ. In other words, this woman represents a city that is built on seven hills that is opposed to Jesus and his followers: Rome.

    - The whore of Babylon is an image of the city of Rome. She is called Babylon because in the Old Testament, Babylon was the nation that destroyed Jerusalem and burned the Temple. Rome, in the year 70, destroyed Jerusalem and burned the Temple.

- In chapter 13, we see another beast rising up out of the sea, and again, this beast has 10 horns and seven heads. It is another reference to Rome.
    - One of the seven heads of the beast seems to have received a death blow, but its mortal wound has been healed. We hear that the beast opened its mouth to speak blasphemies against God. It was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.

- In the final verse of the chapter, John learns what this beast is: "Let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is 666." Here, the author of Revelation is referring to an ancient practice called gematria, a way of calculating the numerical equivalence of a word or name.

- Scholars have long thought that parts of the book of Revelation were written during the time when Christians first started being martyred by Roman emperors, particularly the emperor Nero. It is striking and not accidental that in Hebrew letters, the name Caesar Nero adds up to 666.

- In some circles of the ancient world, it was thought that Nero, who died in the year 64 by committing suicide, was going to come back to life and wreak havoc on the earth. This explains the meaning of the head that had received a mortal wound but healed.

- Revelation is not talking about a future Antichrist—a Hitler or Mussolini to arise in our day. This book was written for Christians living in the Roman Empire, assuring them that God's opponents may have been out in full force but that God is ultimately sovereign and his truth will prevail; in the end, good will triumph over evil.

Suggested Reading

Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*.

Metzger, *Breaking the Code*.

Questions to Consider

1. What features of other ancient apocalypses can you find in the book of Revelation?

2. Even if Revelation is an ancient apocalypse, do you think it is predicting events that were yet to transpire?

Who Were the Original Christians?

Lecture 17

Christianity today is remarkably diverse, but this modern diversity is mild in comparison with what was seen in Christianity in the 2nd century. At the time, some Christians believed in only one God; others thought there were two, 36, or even 365 gods. Some Christians maintained that salvation came from belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus, while others said it came from correct interpretation of his secret teachings. How are we to understand these various groups of Christians, all claiming to be original and to represent Christianity as it was originally taught by Jesus and the apostles? In this lecture, we'll explore this issue, traditionally addressed as the relationship of orthodoxy and heresy in early Christianity.

Defining Orthodoxy and Heresy

- The term "orthodoxy" comes from two Greek words that literally mean "correct belief" or "right teaching." Orthodoxy is set against "heterodoxy," which means "another teaching," a different teaching from that which is orthodox.

- A synonym for heterodoxy is "heresy," from a Greek word meaning "choice." Heretics commit heresy because they have made the choice not to believe correctly.

- In their literal meanings, these terms are problematic for modern historians. It's difficult for modern historians to describe one set of beliefs as correct and another set as incorrect, false, or heretical. As we've said, historians have no access to divine reality; thus, they cannot say whether there is one God or two or whether Jesus was God, man, or somehow both. Such decisions must be made by theologians. The terms are useful, however, for historians to describe different social groups within early Christianity.

- The beliefs put forth by the group that won the battles over right belief are called orthodox by historians. The views that were pronounced out of bounds by this group are called heresies.

The Eusebian Model of Orthodoxy and Heresy

- The traditional view of the relationship between orthodoxy and heresy was first propounded by Eusebius, an author who lived in the 4th century and was the first to write a history of the church.

- In Eusebius's view, orthodoxy was the original form of Christianity. Eusebius maintained that orthodox Christian belief was taught by Jesus himself to his disciples. Jesus taught that there is only one God, that Jesus himself was both divine and human, that the creation is good, and that it was made by the one true God, even if it had fallen into sin. For Eusebius, heresies were later perversions of the truth; by definition, heresies were late and derivative, not original and pristine. Only orthodoxy was original and pristine.

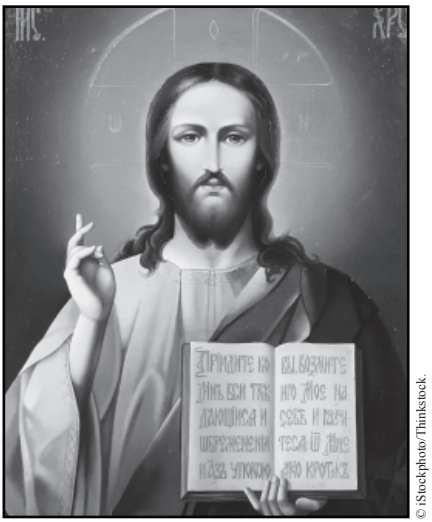
- Here, we can see some of the problems of defining orthodoxy and heresy. Eusebius, of course, agreed with the theological claims of the group that won out. In his view, this perspective was right; thus, he called it orthodox because it held to the right belief, and anything else was heterodox. The Eusebian model for understanding the relationship of heresy and orthodoxy was held by nearly everyone who studied the issue for 1,500 years.

A Modern Model of Orthodoxy and Heresy

- In 1934, a German scholar named Walter Bauer published an important book called *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. Bauer's view was that Eusebius had gotten everything precisely wrong.
    - According to Bauer, as far back as we can trace, there were competing forms of Christianity that were original and dominant in particular regions, such as Egypt, Asia Minor, and Rome.

- Eventually, one of these forms won out because of the economic strength and political power of the group that backed it. For Bauer, the group that won happened to practice the form of Christianity that was centered in Rome. The Roman form of Christianity acquired more converts for its cause than any of the other groups and called itself the true and universal church. The Greek word for universal is "catholic." This form of Christianity, then, became the Roman Catholic Church.

- Today, most critical scholars think that Bauer is wrong in many details of his exposition, but it is widely thought that his basic instincts were right. There was wide diversity within Christianity from the earliest days, and each of the groups that held different views claimed that its views were original. This understanding of early Christianity has been verified increasingly with new archaeological finds of ancient texts, particularly the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945, a group of texts produced by and for Christian Gnostics.



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Early Christian groups disagreed about whether there was one God or many and whether Jesus was human, divine, or both, with each group claiming that its views represented the teachings of Jesus.

Tenets of Gnosticism

- Gnosticism represents a large number of groups of Christians with wide-ranging differences among them. The word "Gnostic" comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge." The Gnostics believed that it was true knowledge that brought salvation, not

faith in Jesus's death and resurrection. This saving knowledge was knowledge of yourself: who you are, where you came from, how you got here, and how you can return.

- The basic view shared among Gnostic religions was that some of us do not belong to this wicked material world. We have come here from the divine realm, and somehow, we have become entrapped in human bodies. The goal of the Gnostic religion is to show us how to escape, which we can do when we learn the truth in the secret knowledge brought from above about our place of origin and the way to return there.

- Most Gnostic religions were metaphysically dualistic. In other words, they believed in two fundamental components of reality: matter and spirit. Matter was evil and sprit was good, and everything participated in one or the other.

- Gnostics also maintained that the true divinity, the ultimate God, was completely unknowable. God is unknowable because he's beyond anything we can perceive. We ourselves are perceived by our senses, but this unknowable God is pure spirit, not susceptible to sense perception. The unknowable God is far beyond anything we can imagine and far beyond anything we can know. He is not accessible to us in the material world.

- The Gnostics told a number of myths to describe how the divine realm came into being. The divine realm, where the gods live, is called the *pleroma*, which means "the fullness." Many of the Gnostic myths describe the generation of other divine beings by the one unknowable God.
    - For example, God was alive, and life became a separate being, separable from the unknowable God; thus, life became a divine being. The unknowable God was spirit; thus, spirit became a separate being. The same was true of eternality and wisdom.

    - In some Gnostic systems, these other beings that emanated from the unknowable God did so in pairs. These paired divine

beings were called *aeons*. The divine realm was made up of a large group of *aeons* that had emanated from the unknowable God and from other *aeons*.

- According to Gnostic myths, a cosmic disaster occurred in the divine realm. In some versions, the material world was created as a place of imprisonment for the *aeon* Sophia ("wisdom") to prevent her from returning to the divine realm. Sophia was divided into a million pieces and placed in human bodies.

- Some people have the divine spark of Sophia within them, but the only way this divine spark can return to the *pleroma* is by learning who it really is, how it got trapped in a body, and how it can return. The only way to escape is by receiving salvific knowledge of the self.

- We usually gain knowledge by sense perception, but the secrets that must come to us about our place of origin come to us apart from sense perception. The only way we can gain the secret knowledge for salvation is by receiving it from a heavenly redeemer. In the Gnostic systems that were Christian, this redeemer was Christ.

- In some Gnostic systems, only a chosen few have the spark of the divine. In fact, some Gnostic or Gnostic-like religions in Christianity maintained that there are three kinds of people: pure animals, who will do nothing more than live and die; Christians, who have faith, do good works, and will have a good afterlife; and Gnostics—those who know the truth. They will have a spectacular afterlife because they will escape their bodies and return to the *pleroma*.

Ethics of Gnosticism

- The orthodox church fathers typically accused the Gnostics of having a libertine ethic. The logic of these church fathers was that because the Gnostics devalued the body as simply a place of imprisonment, they didn't think the body mattered. And if the body

doesn't matter, then it doesn't matter what you do with your body. The orthodox writers who were opposed to the Gnostics said that the Gnostics engaged in wild and profligate activities.

- The church father Irenaeus, for example, writing in the year 185, described a group of Gnostics that he called the Cainites, so named because it was understood that they considered the hero of the faith to be Cain, the son of Adam and Eve who had murdered his brother.

- According to Irenaeus, the Cainites believed that the God of the Old Testament was not the true God; thus, they taught disobedience to God. Obedience to the true God meant breaking the injunctions against working on the Sabbath, eating pork, and so on.

- Despite the accusations of the church fathers, we now know from the Nag Hammadi library that the Gnostics embraced aestheticism. They believed that the body is a prison for the spirit, and the spirit needs to escape the body. The more we enjoy our bodies, the more we become tied to them; thus, the secret to escape is to deprive the body of pleasure.

The Original Form of Christianity

- The various Gnostic groups believed that their views were the views of Jesus, and they had books written by apostles to prove it: the Secret Revelation of John, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Philip, and the Gospel of Judas. Today, scholars believe that Gnosticism was almost certainly a later development than the original form of Christianity.

- But it's important to recognize that what we think of as orthodox Christianity was a later development, as well. The original Christians were the Jewish followers of Jesus, who understood him to be the Jewish messiah sent from the Jewish God to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish Law. Earliest Christianity was Jewish. Only as it came to be accepted by Gentiles, who had little

or no interest in Jewish customs, culture, and Law, did it begin to become the Christianity more familiar to us in later times.

Suggested Reading

Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.

Brakke, *The Gnostics*.

Ehrman, *After the New Testament*.

———, *Lost Christianities*.

Eusebius, *The History of the Church*.

Harnack, *Marcion*.

King, *What Is Gnosticism?*

Meyer, *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*.

Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

Questions to Consider

1. Describe as many different forms of early Christianity as you can.

2. Do you think one of these forms could legitimately lay claim to being the "true" version of Christianity?

Is the True Jesus in the Gnostic Gospels?

Lecture 18

Of all the theological views represented by the multitude of early Christianities, both the various forms of orthodoxy and the various heresies, none was as striking or significant as those involving Jesus himself. Was Christ fully human but not divine? Was he fully divine but not human? Was he two separate beings, one divine and one human, or one individual being, half divine and half human, or one individual, fully divine and fully human? In this lecture, we'll consider three of the most prominent options related to the question of Christ's divinity, with a goal of asking whether the Gnostic gospels can be trusted to reveal the true character of Jesus.

Adoptionists

- In many ways, the adoptionists stood in opposition to the Gnostics, although adoptionism, too, was a heresy. For this group of Christians, Jesus was God by nature. He was a human being who was adopted by God to be his son.

- The roots of this view can be found in some passages of the New Testament that indicate that Jesus became the Son of God at a certain point in his existence. It may well be that this idea was the original view of the disciples of Jesus.
    - The idea that Jesus was adopted as the Son of God at his resurrection is expressed in a speech allegedly given by the apostle Paul in the book of Acts 13. A similar point of view can be found in Paul's Letter to the Romans (1:3–4).

    - Another passage in the New Testament, Luke 3, indicates that Jesus became the Son of God when he was baptized.

- The idea of some early Christians that Jesus became the Son of God at some point in his life, either at his resurrection or at his baptism, later developed into a full-fledged theology. In the 2nd century, we know of groups of adoptionist Christians who maintained that Jesus

himself was completely human, but because he was born more righteous than everyone else, he was chosen to be the Son of God. As the Son of God, he was to die for the sins of others, and he fulfilled his mission at the cross. As a reward, God raised him from the dead.

Marcionites

- A polar opposite view to adoptionism is found among a group of 2nd-century Christians called Marcionites. These were followers of a theologian named Marcion, who was active around 140 C.E. Marcion's hero in the faith was the apostle Paul.

- In Paul's letters in the New Testament, he sometimes differentiated between the Jewish Law and the gospel of Jesus. Paul insisted that a person is made right with God by the gospel of Jesus, not by following the Law. Marcion made this distinction between the Law and the gospel absolute.
    - According to Marcion, the God of the Law is not the God of Jesus. The Old Testament God was a lower divinity who had created the world and had given the Jewish people his Law. This God was wrathful, vengeful, and just—he condemned all people for failing to keep the Law.

    - The God of Jesus was a higher divinity who had been completely unknown to the world until Jesus arrived. Jesus came into the world to save people from the God of the Law. Because Jesus did not come from the God of the Jews, he was not part of the created order, which means that Jesus did not belong to the material world of the inferior creator and did not have a material body; he only seemed to have a material body.

- Marcion's view of Christ is called Docetism, from the Greek word *dokeo*, meaning "to seem" or "to appear." Marcion is called a Docetist because he thought that Jesus only appeared to be a human; Jesus couldn't actually have human flesh because he was a divine being.

- Marcion was not a Gnostic; he thought that faith was required in the death of Jesus, but Jesus's death was an appearance because Jesus was an appearance. Even though Marcion was not a Gnostic, there were some Gnostics who held a Docetic view. Behind this Docetic view was the notion that the divine cannot suffer. Jesus obviously did suffer, but the divine can't suffer because suffering was all an appearance.
    - The 2nd-century author Basilides is one of our earliest Gnostics. We have a report by Irenaeus about the Gospel of Basilides, although we don't have the gospel itself.

    - According to Irenaeus, the Gospel of Basilides indicated that Jesus did not suffer but only appeared to suffer. The reason he appeared to suffer is that Jesus, at the last minute before his crucifixion, switched identities with Simon of Cyrene, the man carrying his cross. Jesus then stood by and laughed as Simon was crucified.

Separationists

- Most Gnostics were not Docetists but held a separationist view: that there is a separation or a difference between the man Jesus and the divine Christ. Some Gnostics maintained that when Jesus was baptized, he received the divine Christ within himself.

- In this view, Jesus himself was a man. He was born to human parents, but at his baptism, something special happened. According to the Gospel of Mark, the heavens ripped open, and the Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove and entered into Jesus. The Gnostics maintained that this Spirit was a divine *aeon* that entered Jesus at the baptism and empowered him for his ministry.

- At the end of his life, as Jesus was beginning to suffer, the divine element left him because the divine cannot suffer. Hanging on the cross, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In Gnostic thinking, the divine element—God—had left Jesus so that he would suffer when the divine element could not suffer.

- This is a separationist Christology, one that separates the human Jesus from the divine Christ, with the divine Christ coming into Jesus at his baptism and leaving him at his crucifixion.

The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter

- A number of Gnostic gospels seem to embody the separationist view. One of the most interesting was discovered among the Nag Hammadi library: the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter, written sometime in the 2nd century.

- The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter is interesting for a number of reasons, including the fact that it attacks people who have contrary views to those set forth in this book. In particular, the author attacks people who are later thought of as orthodox. The book claims to be written by Peter, although it was not.
    - As the book begins, Jesus tells Peter of people who are "without perception": "They will hold fast to the name of a dead man, thinking that they will become pure, but they will become greatly defiled. For some of them will blaspheme the truth and proclaim evil teaching."

    - Of course, these words refer to orthodox Christians, who think that the death of Jesus is what matters for salvation. For this author, the death of Jesus has no bearing on salvation.

- Toward the end of the book, Peter watches the crucifixion and sees multiple manifestations of Jesus: Jesus on the cross and Jesus laughing above the cross. Jesus explains that the manifestation on the cross is merely the physical shell of Jesus. The one above the cross who is laughing is the living Jesus, the real Jesus who gives life.

- Further, Jesus tells Peter that the physical shell that is being crucified is the home of demons; it belongs to Elohim, the God of the Old Testament, the God who created this world. Then he says, "The one who stands near him is the living Savior, the primal part in him, whom they seized. He has been released." The divine Spirit within Jesus—the Christ, the divine being—has been set free. The

living Jesus laughs at the people who think they can hurt him. They can't hurt the divine Christ; he is separate from the man Jesus.

- This separationist Christology stresses that it is not the body but the spirit that matters. Jesus's spirit was the divine element within him, and it was set free. It was set free because the death of Jesus is not what matters for salvation. What matters is knowing the secret knowledge that can set you free.

The Gospel of Thomas

- The Gospel of Thomas contains 114 sayings of Jesus, about half of which can be found in the New Testament. Scholars debate whether the Gospel of Thomas should be considered a Gnostic gospel or not. The deep mythologies that we find in other Nag Hammadi writings cannot be found in this gospel, but there are sayings in the gospel that make sense if we presuppose that a Gnostic myth lies behind them.

- The death and resurrection of Jesus are not important for this gospel. What matters for this gospel is knowing who you really are: "If you know yourselves, then you will be known and you will know that you are the sons of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you are in poverty and you are poverty." You're in poverty because you're in a material body, but if you know who you really are, you can find salvation.

- In saying 28, Jesus tells the disciples that he will be revealed to them "When you undress without being ashamed and take your clothes and put them under your feet as little children and tramp on them." The clothes are the material body; to see the salvation that Jesus can bring, we need to escape the body and trample on it.

- Jesus is said to have come from the divine realm in this gospel and to be returning. This world itself is a material corpse that must be brought back to life. In saying 56, Jesus says, "The salvation that can come from this corpse of a world is by secret knowledge." And in the first saying, he says, "The one who finds the meaning of these

words will not taste death." Salvation will not come to this world; salvation comes from this world.

- The Gnostic texts discovered at Nag Hammadi present different views of Jesus from what came later to be accepted as orthodoxy. The authors of these texts maintained that they were written by the apostles of Jesus and that they represented the original form of Christian teaching. It's widely recognized today, however, that these books don't represent the views about Jesus among his earliest followers; instead, they are later developments of Christian thinking based on more philosophically sophisticated ideas.

Suggested Reading

Brakke, *The Gnostics*.

Ehrman, *After the New Testament*.

Ehrman and Plese, *The Other Gospels*.

Harnack, *Marcion*.

King, *What Is Gnosticism?*

Meyer, *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*.

Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

Questions to Consider

1. Summarize a Gnostic view of the world.

2. Do you think that any of the Gnostic gospels may provide accurate insights into the teachings of the historical Jesus?

What Happened to the Apostles?

Lecture 19

The term "apostle" comes from a Greek word that means "one who was sent." In early Christianity, "apostle" was a technical term for those who were sent by Christ to spread the gospel after his death and resurrection; the term applied to the disciples (except Judas), Paul, and a few others. These apostles of Jesus are arguably among the most important figures in the history of Western civilization. If they had not spread the Christian message, Christianity would never have become the dominant force of the Western world, yet we are almost completely in the dark about who these people were and what they did. In this lecture, we'll look at stories about the apostles.

Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles

- Many of the stories that are considered common knowledge about the apostles are not, in fact, found in the New Testament. They are preserved only in apocryphal books, called collectively the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. In many respects, these books are meant to supplement the stories told in the fifth book of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles.

- As we have seen, the Acts of Apostles is the second volume of a two-volume work consisting of Luke and Acts. Luke is the gospel that tells of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the Acts of the Apostles tells of the missionary activities of the apostles after Jesus's ascension. The book of Acts was probably written around the year 85 or 90. It primarily discusses Peter and Paul, with the other apostles appearing rarely, if at all.

- Among its thematic points, the book of Acts tries to show first that after Jesus's death, God was behind the mission to spread the Christian gospel throughout the Roman world and no one could stop it. Second, the book tries to show that the gospel was meant to go to all people and that Gentiles did not have to become Jewish

to be followers of Jesus. Third, the book puts forth the apostle Paul as the greatest figure in the first generation of believers, a man empowered by God to do mighty works and to convert the Gentiles.

- Later authors, living in the mid- to late 2nd century, were not satisfied with the sparse treatment of the apostles in this canonical account; thus, they produced accounts of individual apostles. Scholars today do not regard these Apocryphal Acts as historically trustworthy documents. They were produced more than a century after the apostles themselves had died, were based on legends that had been in oral circulation, and are highly imaginative rather than historically reliable.

The Acts of Thomas

- We've already seen the Acts of Thomas in Lecture 3. This book is the earliest record we have of Thomas being the first missionary to take the gospel to India. One of its more intriguing stories takes place as soon as Thomas arrives in India.

- As you recall, Thomas had been purchased as a slave to work for the king of India as a carpenter. The king gives Thomas a large sum of money to build a palace, but Thomas distributes the money to the poor. Thomas then tells the king that the palace is almost complete, but he needs more money to construct the roof; again, he distributes the money to the poor.

- The king returns to the city to see the palace, but his friends tell him that Thomas has not built anything and has distributed all the money to the poor. The king has Thomas arrested and decides to have him flogged and burned to death.

- Then, the king's brother, Gad, falls ill and dies. Angels take the soul of Gad to heaven, where he sees the palace that Thomas has been building for his brother. Gad is allowed to return to life to buy this heavenly palace from his brother, the king. The king realizes that the good works Thomas has done by distributing his money to the

poor have gone to his credit, and he will have a blessed afterlife if he becomes a follower of Jesus, which he does.

Thecla and Paul

- The other Acts of the Apostles have a similar focus on the need to live simply and ascetically in this life so as to enjoy the pleasures of heaven in the life to come. Nowhere is this lesson taught more clearly than in the Acts of Paul, particularly in the stories of Paul's female convert, Thecla. For centuries, Thecla was considered one of the most important figures in early Christianity.

- In the Acts of Paul, Paul arrives in the city of Iconium on a missionary journey. In the home of a man named Onesiphorus, he begins preaching his message to some assembled Christians. Although the historical Paul taught that a person is made right with God by believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus, in this account, Paul preaches a message of asceticism: that in order to have salvation, one must fear God and live in chastity.
    - Thecla, who happens to live next door, hears Paul deliver this message. She is a young virgin who is engaged to a wealthy aristocrat named Thamyris, but as she listens to Paul's proclamation, she decides to commit herself to his gospel. She will call off her engagement and remain chaste for her entire life.

    - Thamyris and Thecla's mother try to persuade Thecla to rethink her position, but she is committed. Out of anger, Thamyris turns Thecla over to the ruling authorities, saying that she is being disruptive of social norms. The local administrator finds that she is guilty and condemns her to be burned at the stake. But as Thecla is being burned, God sends a thunderstorm that puts out the fire, and Thecla manages to escape.

    - In another story about Thecla, she travels to Antioch with Paul on a missionary journey. There, another aristocrat falls in love with her, but when she refuses to go away with him, he turns her over to the authorities, and she's condemned to fight the wild beasts in the arena. Again, God intervenes and Thecla escapes.

- Yet another story in the Acts of Paul tells of Paul himself arrested for his missionary activities and condemned to face the wild beasts. In the arena, Paul faces an enormous lion, but this is a talking lion that Paul had met and baptized earlier in the wilderness. The lion agrees not to harm Paul; a hailstorm then hits, destroying the other animals and allowing Paul and the lion to escape.

The Acts of Peter

- The Acts of Peter is mainly about contests between Peter and his archenemy, the great heretic Simon Magus. Each of these characters tries to outdo the other in the miracles he can perform in order to show that God is truly on his side, not on the side of his opponent.

- In one story, Peter is preaching to a crowd. Some people believe his message, but others say that Peter must perform a miracle for them to believe. Peter takes a smoked tuna from the window of a nearby fishmonger shop, throws into the water, and orders it to come to life, which it does. Those who were unbelievers in the crowd convert.

- In another incident, Simon announces that he will physically ascend to heaven to prove that his gospel is true and Peter's is false. Simon starts flying up to the sky, but Peter prays to God to deprive Simon of his power of flight in midair. Simon falls back to earth, breaks his leg, and is stoned for being a false prophet.

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The Acts of Peter tells us that Jesus will be crucified again in Peter, and Peter goes to his death rejoicing.

- The Acts of Peter ends with the crucifixion of Peter. It is often thought that Peter was crucified upside down, as recorded in the Acts of Peter. The episode is preceded by the famous "*Quo vadis?*"
    - Peter had been preaching an ascetic message in Rome, telling even married women that they should maintain their chastity. The prefect of Rome arranges to have Peter arrested and executed.

    - When Peter learns that he is to be arrested, he goes into hiding. Eventually, he is persuaded to leave the city, and as he does so, he sees Jesus approaching, walking toward Rome. Peter asks, "*Quo vadis?*" ("Where are you going?"), and Jesus says that he is going to Rome to be crucified.

    - When Jesus says that he must be crucified again, Peter realizes his true meaning: that he, Peter, must be crucified, and by this crucifixion, Jesus will be crucified again. Peter returns to Rome rejoicing and praising the Lord.

    - Peter asks to be crucified upside down, not because he feels unworthy to be killed in the same manner as Jesus but to teach the people around him a lesson. What he tells these people is that the world itself is upside down. What seems good in this world—pleasure—is bad. What seems bad in this world—the pain of crucifixion—is good; suffering for the faith can bring eternal life.

    - The irony in this story is that we all are looking at things upside down, even though it looks to us as if Peter is the one who's upside down. Only the one who dies for the faith can see the world properly.

The Acts of John

- A number of passages in the Acts of John describe John's encounter with the historical Jesus; interestingly, these passages embrace a Docetic Christology.

- John tells us that at times, he touched Jesus and felt a material body, but at other times, he touched Jesus and the substance was "immaterial and bodiless," as if Jesus didn't exist at all. He also tells of walking with Jesus but not seeing his footprints.

- Later on, John tells what happened at Jesus's crucifixion, which seems very much like what we saw in the Apocalypse of Peter. As John watches the crucifixion, Jesus appears to him and explains that he is not suffering what he seems to be suffering.

- Probably the most amusing story of the Acts of John has to do with an incident that occurred while John was on a missionary journey. At an inn, he finds that his bed is filled with bedbugs. To the amusement of his companions, John orders the bedbugs out, and they leave.

- Such legends about the apostles were wholeheartedly believed by Christians for centuries. Today, scholars recognize that the Apocryphal Acts do indeed make for entertaining reading, and they're useful for seeing how later Christians imagined and talked about the apostles of Jesus. Still, quite apart from the fantastic miracles they narrate, we don't know whether these stories have any historical credibility or not.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *After the New Testament*.

———, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*.

Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*.

Eusebius, *The History of the Church*.

Questions to Consider

1. Which legends about the apostles strike you as the most interesting?

2. Do any of the stories about the apostles we considered in this lecture seem historically plausible?

Was Christianity an Illegal Religion?

Lecture 20

As mentioned earlier, many people base their knowledge of early Christianity on popular novels and films. One common misperception is that Christians were hunted down in the Roman Empire and forced to hide to escape persecution. In this lecture, we'll see that Christianity was not, technically speaking, an illegal religion in the early centuries of its existence, nor did most Christians have to go into hiding to avoid being persecuted or martyred. To understand the persecution of Christians, we must consider what was generally required of all people in the Roman Empire: not to be socially disruptive and to worship the state gods. Early Christians ran into trouble on both accounts.

Roman Religion

- In the Roman world, virtually everyone was polytheistic, worshiping many gods instead of one god. Gods were worshiped for many purposes, and all of the gods deserved worship. Romans recognized the gods of Mount Olympus, city gods, family gods, gods of fields and forests, and gods with various functions, such as gods of war, health, childbirth, and love.

- These gods were not worshiped because people were concerned about the afterlife. Those who believed in an afterlife didn't think there was much that could be done to affect one's status in it. People were far more concerned about earthly life because they lived very close to the edge. People can't control such events as death in childbirth, infant mortality, and natural disaster, but the gods are powerful; they were worshiped to control these events in people's lives.

- The gods were worshiped through cultic acts of prayers and sacrifices. Personal beliefs played almost no role in ancient religions, especially religions in the Roman Empire. It didn't matter what you believed about the gods; what mattered is that you engaged in acts of worship in which you would pray to the gods and

perform sacrifices. Offering the gods animals or other foodstuffs honored and appeased them so that they did not manifest their dissatisfaction by engaging in wrathful acts against people.

- Finally, there was no sense of separation of church and state in ancient Rome. The gods had made the state great. For that reason, the state sponsored worship of the gods. In addition to worshiping whatever other gods they chose, people were expected to worship the state gods. Refusing to worship the state gods was seen as an act of political subversion and led to disastrous results.
    - This information comes to us from Christian writers who object, on occasion, to the reasons for their persecution. The most famous instance is in the Latin author Tertullian, who lived in North Africa in the early 3rd century.

    - In his book called the *Apology*, Tertullian complains about why Christians are persecuted: "They [the persecutors] think that Christians are the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber River rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up, if the heavens give no rain, if there's an earthquake, if there's a famine or pestilence, straightaway the cry is 'Away with the Christians to the lion!'"

    - Jews were excepted from the need to worship the state gods because they embraced an ancient religion.

Roman Perceptions of Christian Practices

- The problem of not worshiping the state gods was exacerbated by the fact that Christians were seen as socially disruptive and dangerous.
    - In the Roman world, the major social unit was the family. Christians split up families and considered members of the church to be brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers; they encouraged people to leave their own families to join the family of the church.

- Recall the story of Thecla in the last lecture, who abandoned her fiancé to follow the apostle Paul. This story is not a historical report, but it's entirely plausible; it made sense to Christian readers because they knew that such things happened.

- Another major unit in the Roman world was the town or the city. Christians typically refused to participate in town and city festivals in honor of the gods. They were, in that sense, highly disruptive of society; more than that, they were seen as dangerous.

- Christians were known to meet secretly, before dawn or after dark. They called one another brother and sister, and they greeted one another by kissing. They were known to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of God. These secret societies seemed dangerous because the behavior of their members was completely inappropriate. Charges of incest and cannibalism against Christians might seem unbelievable to us today, but they were widely believed in the Roman Empire.
  - The tutor of Marcus Aurelius, a man named Fronto, is quoted as leveling such charges in a book by a Christian author, Minucius Felix. The pagan Fronto says, "Indiscriminately they call each other brother and sister and thus turn even ordinary fornication into incest by the intervention of these hallowed names."

  - Fronto goes on to describe how the Christians provoke a dog to put out the torch that lights their meetings, allowing the "brothers and sisters" to engage in sex. Even more horrifying, Fronto indicates that Christians engaged in infanticide and cannibalism. Such accusations resulted in persecutions.

Grassroots Persecution

- Early on in the history of the church, persecutions were not organized by the Roman administration itself; instead, they took place at the grassroots level. We see this first in the New Testament, initially among Jews and, later, among pagans.

- The narratives of the book of Acts provide numerous accounts of Christians being persecuted, principally through the synagogues. Christian proclamations about Jesus as the messiah caused irritation among non-Christian Jews, who eventually drove out the Christians and sometimes inflicted punishments on them. Eventually, Christianity became less of a Jewish religion and more of a religion that was intent on converting Gentiles, leading to greater persecution.

- One of the most important books of the New Testament with respect to persecution is the letter of 1 Peter. The author of this letter is principally concerned about the suffering that Christians are experiencing.
    - In this letter, we learn that Christians accused the pagans of "living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, rebels carousing, and lawless idolatry." Pagans responded by accusing the Christians of engaging in these same activities.

    - From the Christian point of view, their friends and neighbors were not happy about the fact that they had converted away from a licentious lifestyle. As a result, the Christians were persecuted.

    - The author of 1 Peter assures his readers that it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.

- Most of the early persecution of Christians, then, came at the grassroots level, as friends or family members of Christians decided that the Christians were out of bounds and needed to be punished. The only time administrators got involved is when there was some kind of crowd or mob attack on Christians.

Imperial Opposition to Christians

- The first episode of imperial opposition to Christians came in the 60s C.E. with the emperor Nero. The episode is described by

the Roman historian Tacitus around the year 115 in his book *The Annals of Rome*.

- According to Tacitus, Nero hired arsonists to burn down parts of the city of Rome so that he could replace these quarters with some architectural designs of his own choosing. The populace who had been burned out suspected Nero, but the emperor blamed the Christians because they were known for their hatred of the human race. He rounded up Christians in Rome and subjected them to horrible tortures.

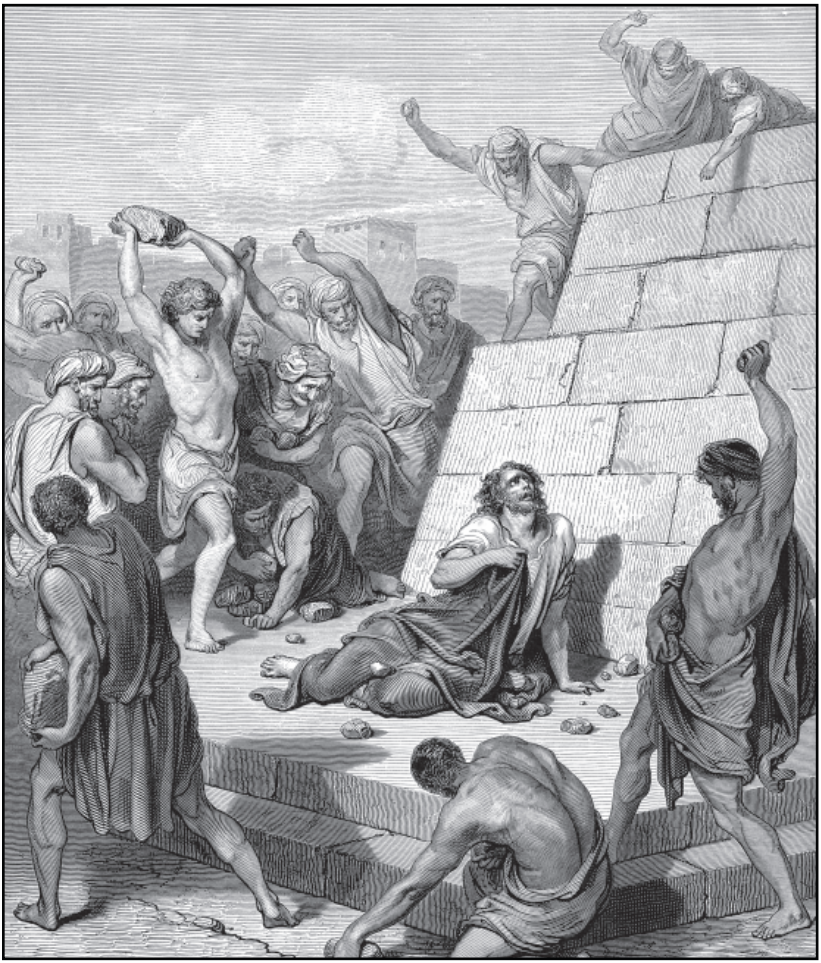
- Note that Nero's persecution was localized to Rome; it was not empire-wide. Moreover, it was not a persecution based on being Christian; although they were Christians, those who were tortured and executed were charged with arson.

- The next episode we learn about took place during the reign of the emperor Trajan, sometime between 110–112 C.E. We know about this persecution from the letters of Pliny the Younger.
  - Pliny was the governor of a region of Asia Minor called Pontus Bithynia. He wrote to the emperor asking for advice on how to punish Christians who were gathering to worship. His own approach had been to execute those who insisted that they were Christians and to force those who claimed not to be Christians to perform a sacrifice to the gods and curse Christ.

  - Pliny goes on to say that large numbers of people in his province had become Christians. In his response, the emperor tells Pliny that Christians are not to be sought out, but if they are denounced, they are to be put on trial and, if they refuse to recant, executed.

- We have a number of writings from Christians about the martyrdoms that resulted from these persecutions, including a book called the Letter of Leon et Vient. This letter was allegedly written by Christians who had survived a persecution in the province of Gaul (France).

- The letter describes a massive uprising against Christians at the grassroots level by a mob; eventually, Christians were arrested, and the ruling authorities tried to get them to recant. In this account, the Christians remained firm in their beliefs even in the face of torture and death.



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For Christian authors, tales of martyrdom emphasized the idea that the present world was transitory; it was the world to come that mattered.

- The author of the letter provides graphic accounts of the tortures inflicted on those who refused to give up their beliefs.

- Christian authors celebrated the martyrdoms of other Christians to emphasize the idea that the pleasures—and pains—of this world are nothing in comparison with the joys of heaven.

- Persecutions came and went through the early centuries of Christianity. Radical, sporadic persecutions came to a climax with the emperor Decius, who declared an empire-wide persecution of Christians in 249.

- Over the course of the next 60 years, various imperial decrees urged persecution at different times and in different places. In about the year 312, the emperor Constantine converted and made Christianity a legal religion, but it did not become the state religion of Rome until the end of the century, in the year 380, under the emperor Theodosius. The ultimate shift from being a persecuted, to a favored, to an official religion changed everything, not only for Christianity itself but for the history of Western civilization for centuries to come.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *After the New Testament*.

Eusebius, *The History of the Church*.

Questions to Consider

1. Summarize the leading reasons Christians were persecuted in the early centuries of the church.

2. How do you explain the widespread animosity against early Christians among their Jewish and pagan neighbors?

Is the Old Testament a Christian Book?

Lecture 21

The Christian Old Testament is, of course, the Jewish scripture, sometimes called the Hebrew Bible. In many Christian communities today, the Old Testament occupies a rather ambiguous position. Rarely are sermons preached on the Old Testament, and many Christians see it as irrelevant. Some have an even more negative view, claiming that the Old Testament God appears to be different from the New Testament God. The question of the relationship of these two books of scripture is of interest to anyone studying the history of the Christian religion and the relations of Jews and Christians. In this lecture, we'll look at different Christian attitudes toward the Old Testament over the early centuries of the religion.

From Judaism to Christianity

- It's important to remember that the historical Jesus and his followers were Jews. Jesus followed the Jewish Laws, became a Jewish teacher, and had Jewish followers. For Jesus and his followers, the Jewish scriptures were the Bible—the only Bible. After Jesus's death, the Jewish scriptures became increasingly important for his followers, some of whom pointed out that Jesus had fulfilled the prophecies expected of the messiah found in the Hebrew Bible.

- It's safe to say that in the early years, the Christian movement was a thoroughly Jewish affair. Jesus was the Jewish messiah sent from the Jewish God in fulfillment of the Jewish Law. To be a follower of Jesus, one had to be Jewish, which meant keeping the Jewish Law.

- Eventually, however, the Christian mission spread to the Gentiles, especially through the work of the apostle Paul, who maintained that it was the death and resurrection of Jesus, not the Jewish Law, that mattered before God. Gentiles, therefore, could become followers of Jesus without the Law.

Paul's Letter to the Galatians

- Not everyone agreed with Paul on the subject of Gentiles and the Law. He had heated debates on this issue with other Christian leaders and missionaries. Nowhere is Paul's anger on this subject more evident than in his Letter to the Galatians, written to Christians in a community who had become convinced that in order to be followers of Jesus, they had to keep the Jewish Law.

- In following the Law, Paul notes that the Galatians are "turning to a different gospel." The idea that a Gentile must follow the Jewish Law to be a follower of Jesus is not simply an alternative way of understanding Christianity but a completely different—and unacceptable—gospel.

- Paul goes on to give a brief account of his life, explaining that he was once a zealous Jew keeping the Law, but he came to realize that Christ was God's solution to the human dilemma and that it was Christ's death, not the Jewish Law, that mattered.

- Toward the end of the letter, Paul takes on the problem of circumcision. Men in the Galatian community have gotten circumcised because they thought that's what the Law demanded of the people of God. Paul tells these men that if all they had to do to be right with God was to get circumcised, then there would be no reason for Christ to have come.
  - Paul says, "You who want to be justified by the Law have cut yourselves off from Christ. You have fallen away from grace."

  - This statement is kind of a play on words; instead of cutting off the foreskin, these men have cut themselves off from Christ.

  - This wordplay becomes more sarcastic when Paul speaks about the Jewish Christian missionaries who were trying to get the Galatians to convert to follow Judaism while being Christian (5:12): "I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves."

Questioning the Old Testament

- Paul's preaching naturally called the status of the Old Testament into question—not for Paul but for Gentiles who had become followers of Jesus. As Gentiles increasingly took over the church from Jews, they questioned the point of retaining the Hebrew Bible.

- We know of some groups of Jewish Christians in the 2nd century, Christians who insisted that followers of Jesus had to follow the Jewish Law. Jesus followed the Jewish Law, fulfilled the Jewish Law, and taught the Jewish Law; following Jesus meant following the Jewish Law.

- Opposing this view was Marcion, who taught that the God of the Old Testament was literally a different God from the God of the New Testament. For that reason, Marcion believed that there were two sets of scripture: one for Jews, the Old Testament, and one for Christians, a canon consisting of 10 letters of Paul and a form of the Gospel of Luke.

The Letter of Barnabas

- We find yet another view in the writings of an anonymous author from the early 2nd century traditionally known as Barnabas. The Letter of Barnabas is an important book that almost became part of the orthodox New Testament. Far more anti-Jewish than anything that made it into the New Testament, the letter is meant to explain what the Christians' relationship to the Old Testament ought to be.

- Barnabas's view is that the Old Testament is a Christian

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According to Barnabas, when Moses smashed the tablets of the Law given him by God, the covenant was broken; the Jews were no longer God's people.

book that has always been misunderstood by Jews because they are not really the people of God.

- As recounted in the book of Exodus, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai after receiving the Law of God, he saw that the people had committed idolatry. In response, Moses smashed the two tablets of the Law, on which were written the Ten Commandments.

- According to Barnabas, that act broke the covenant that God had made with the Jewish people.

- The laws that God subsequently gave were widely misunderstood by the Jewish people. They thought that the laws were to be followed literally, but God meant for them to be followed figuratively or spiritually.
  - For example, in interpreting the law against eating pork, Jews should look at the behavior of pigs, which are noisy when they're hungry but silent when they're full. According to Barnabas, the law meant that people shouldn't behave in that way. You shouldn't pray to God only when you're in need but not pray when things are going well. You should pray to God all the time.

  - Some of Barnabas's interpretations are even more bizarre. In chapter 10:6, he explains that the law against eating rabbit stems from the fact that rabbits are wildly profligate, and people shouldn't behave in that way.

- Barnabas is also the first Christian author who calculated that the world was to last for 6,000 years. He points out that the Bible says, "With the Lord, a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day." If God created the world in six days and commands us to rest on the seventh, that means that the creation was to last 6,000 years; at the end of 6,000 years will come a "year"—a millennium—of rest.

- As a final example, Barnabas takes on the meaning of circumcision. He interprets the number of servants first circumcised by

Abraham—318—using the ancient gematria system. According to him, the number was the equivalent of the letter *tau*, which looks like a cross, and *iota eta*, the first letters of the name Iesous—Jesus. Thus, the law of circumcision means that people are to believe in Jesus's cross for salvation, not literally to cut off the foreskins of infant boys.

The Passover Homily

- An even more extreme view of the relationship of the Old Testament to Christianity is found in the writings of Melito of Sardis. Melito preached a sermon known as the Passover Homily, in which he accused Jews of killing Jesus; because Jesus was God, the Jews were guilty of killing God. Throughout this sermon, Melito emphasizes that Jews never understood their own scripture.

- For Melito, the New Testament fulfilled the Old Testament in the way a building fulfills its architectural designs. If an architect makes a model of a building and then builds it, he no longer needs the model. In Melito's understanding, the Old Testament was like a model of what would happen with the coming of Jesus. Once it was fulfilled, there was no longer any need for it, and it could be destroyed.

The Orthodox View

- The view of the form of Christianity that won out—orthodoxy—was that the Old Testament could not be discarded. The orthodox view emphasized that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are the same. Further, the New Testament fulfills the Old Testament, but it doesn't invalidate it. The Old Testament continues to be scripture even if its laws are no longer in effect now that Christ has died.

- This emphasis on the continuity between the God of the Old and New Testaments was made to counter both Marcion and the Gnostics.
    - The Gnostics thought that the God of the Old Testament was Yaltabaoth, an unformed being that came into existence when

Sophia fell from the *pleroma*. This God was a lower, ignorant divinity, sometimes portrayed as evil.

- For orthodox Christians, this view was not acceptable. In fact, the God of the Old Testament is the God of Jesus; he not only created the world, but he called Israel to be his people. He gave them his Law through Moses. It was right for Jews to keep the Law literally, but the coming of Jesus had fulfilled the Law so that it no longer needed to be followed.

- Another reason that orthodox Christians decided to retain the Old Testament is that it alone provided antiquity for the Christian religion.
  - Unlike the modern world, the world of antiquity valued the ancient over the novel. For a philosophy or a religion to be right, it had to be ancient.

  - Christians answered charges that their recently developed religion couldn't possibly be right by saying that the Jewish Bible belonged to them and that it predicted Jesus. In fact, Moses and the Prophets were Christians, anticipating that Jesus would arrive.

  - By holding on to the Old Testament, Christians could claim antiquity for their religion, and they did so explicitly. They pointed out that Moses was 400 years older than Homer and 800 years older than Plato, and he had predicted Jesus. Christianity, then, is older than anything in pagan and Greek philosophical circles.

  - Moreover, in Genesis 1, when God says, "Let us make man in our own image," he is talking to Jesus, the preexistent one. Jesus existed with God before the beginning of time.

- In the end, Christians took over the Jewish scriptures and called them their own. For orthodox Christians, the Old Testament became a Christian book, not a Jewish one.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *After the New Testament*.

Harnack, *Marcion*.

Questions to Consider

1. Summarize two early Christian views of the Old Testament to show their sharp differences.

2. Why do you think, in the long run, the Christians decided to keep the Old Testament as part of their scripture?

Did Early Christians Accept the Trinity?

Lecture 22

Arguably, the most important doctrine of traditional Christianity, and certainly the most distinctive, is the doctrine of the Trinity: the view that even though there is only one God, he is manifest in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all of whom are distinct from one another and fully God. Together, they make up not three Gods, but one God. This view came to clear expression by the end of the 4th Christian century, but it was not the original Christian understanding. In this lecture, we'll see how the early Christians came to develop this nuanced doctrine.

Jesus as the Adopted Son of God

- As we've seen, biblical scholars have argued that the earliest followers of Jesus held an adoptionist view: At the resurrection, God had exalted Jesus and made him his son. In this view, Jesus was a mortal, but because of his obedience to God, God exalted him to a higher status. We see this view in, for example, Romans 1:3–4 and Acts 2.

- This adoptionist view is sometimes called a low Christology, meaning that the view starts with Christ as a mortal, in the lower realm of earth, but he is then exalted to a higher realm. In contrast, a high Christology starts with Jesus as divine, then has him coming to earth to become human.

- The term "low Christology" is, in some ways, inappropriate. Being adopted as the Son of God was a significant event. In ancient Rome, any adopted son acquired the status, power, wealth, and inheritance of the father who adopted him. If an emperor adopted a son, that son became the next emperor. If God adopted a son, it would mean that he would acquire the status, power, wealth, and inheritance of a divine being. In a sense, that son would become equal with God.

- Eventually, some Christians came to think that Jesus must not have been the Son of God only from his resurrection but for his entire public ministry. Later Christians came to think that Jesus was the Son of God not simply for his entire ministry but for his entire life. Still later Christians came to think that Jesus was not simply the Son of God for his mortal life but that he had always had a divine existence.

John's Understanding of Jesus

- We find this view of Jesus's divine existence in the opening of the last gospel of the New Testament, the Gospel of John. Here, Jesus is understood to be the incarnation of a preexistent being who was with God and was God. "Incarnation" means "having become flesh." In this idea, there was a being with God who existed before Jesus came into being; this entity became a human being, and that human being was Jesus.

- The opening of John's gospel is one of the most-quoted passages of the New Testament: "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being that came into being." In verse 14, the gospel continues: "And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of a Father's only Son full of grace and truth." Three verses later, we learn that this word become flesh is Christ.

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In Genesis, God creates the heavens and the earth by speaking his word: "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light."

- This passage has created a mountain of scholarship over

the years and is indeed quite complicated. What is the meaning of "In the beginning was the word"? The term "word" here is *logos*; for some Greek philosophers, *logos* was not a word so much as a reason, reasoning, intellectual power, understanding.

- Some philosophers thought that *logos* filled the entire universe, that it's what makes the universe make sense to us; if we live according to the *logos*—according to reason—we will fit in well with the universe.

- Some Greek philosophers thought that the *logos* was the mediator between the divine and the human realms, the way that gods could interact with human beings.

- For Jewish readers, the opening of John would call to mind the beginning of the book of Genesis, where God speaks his word to create the heavens and the earth. In the Gospel of John, this word that God speaks is understood as a being that is with God and is God. It's almost as if the word that God speaks becomes personified; it is separate from God because the words we speak are separate from us. In another sense, God's word is a manifestation of God, a reflection of who he is, but it's understood to be a manifestation of God that has become his own word.

- For John, in the beginning was this word that created all things, but the word was some kind of person who existed before the word of God. When it became a human being, that human being was Jesus Christ. Jesus is not simply exalted to be the Son of God at his resurrection, his baptism, or his birth; he is the incarnation of God's *logos*.

- This idea certainly had overtones from the book of Genesis, which is why, in the Gospel of John, Jesus makes declarations about himself that we don't find in any of the other gospels. In John 10:30, he says, "I and the Father are one." How can Christ be God and God be God, yet there is only one God? Moreover, in John 14–16, Jesus talks about the Spirit of God as a separate being from himself who would come after him and be like him here on earth. If there are three beings that are God, do we have three Gods?

Modalism

- One view that emerged in response to this question was modalism, an attempt to preserve the unity of God by people who wanted to insist that they were monotheists, not polytheists, yet who still believed that Jesus was God and the Spirit was God. These modalists said that Jesus and the Spirit were not separate beings from God; they were God the Father, who manifests himself in three modes of existence.

- Any individual may exist in more than one mode; a man may be a son, a father, and a brother. According to modalists, the same is true of God. God the Father is the one being that exists, but he manifests himself as the Son and the Spirit.

- Modalism was a popular solution to the problem of how Jesus could be God and God could be God, yet there was only one God. It may well have been the majority point of view in many portions of the church at the end of the 2nd century, but eventually, it came under attack because some people were dissatisfied with the idea that the Father could become the Son and suffer for the sins of the world.

Tertullian's Understanding of the Trinity

- Tertullian, a church father living in the early 3rd century in Carthage, North Africa, wrote a treatise against modalism directed to a man named Praxis. For Tertullian, the idea that the Father became the Son and suffered on the cross was nonsensical. It wasn't the Father who suffered but the Son. Moreover, if the Father becomes the Son, then whose son is he?

- In the course of attacking Praxis, Tertullian lays out his own understanding.
    - He rejects the idea that the Father was born and had suffered. He maintains that there is only one God, but that this one God has a Son—his word—who proceeded from God, by whom all things were made.

- This one who proceeded from God is both man and God, the Son of man and the Son of God, who died, was raised by the Father, and now sits at the right hand of the Father and is to be worshiped along with the Holy Spirit. There are three beings, but there's only one God.

- Tertullian was the first person to use the term Trinity.

The Arian Controversy

- By the beginning of the 4th Christian century, probably about five percent of the Roman Empire was Christian. In the year 312, the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity; he believed that this religion, with its emphasis on unity, could perhaps be a unifying force for his fragmented empire.

- The problem was that Christianity itself was fragmented along theological lines, in large part because of the views of a man named Arius, a deacon of the church in Alexandria. Arius tried to understand how Jesus could be God and God be God, but there was only one true God. In Arius's view, Jesus was God, but he was subordinate to God the Father. In fact, he was created by God at some point in eternity past.

- Arius was opposed by his own bishop, a man named Alexander, and a young leader in the church, Athanasius. According to these men, Christ was not a subordinate being who had been created by God at some time in the past. There was, in fact, no time before which Christ did not exist. He had always existed.

- These differing views caused a good deal of turmoil in the church; thus, Constantine called a council of some 300 bishops from around the Christian world to debate the topic at a meeting in the city of Nicaea. The issue was not whether Jesus was the Son of God. Everyone believed that Jesus was God, but the question was: In what sense was he God?

- After much debate, the council agreed that Christ was equal with God, not subordinate to God. Christ and God were not simply similar in their nature or substance; they were identical in nature or substance. This was expressed by the term *homoousios*, meaning "of the same substance." In contrast, the term *homoiousias* expressed the idea that Jesus was of a similar substance with the Father.

- The belief that Christ is of the same substance as the Father and that he had always existed is the backbone of the teaching of the Trinity. The Spirit also was considered to be of God and of the same substance as the Father and the Son. Thus, after several decades, Christianity arrived at the final teaching of the Trinity: There are three persons who are God, but there is only one God. This teaching remains a mystery, but it became the standard view of Christians by the end of the 4th century and, for Orthodox Christians, remains today an article of faith.

Suggested Reading

Dünzel, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church*.

Ehrman, *After the New Testament*.

Norris, ed. and trans., *The Christological Controversy*.

Rusch, trans. and ed., *The Trinitarian Controversy*.

Questions to Consider

1. What do you think the very first followers of Jesus thought about him? Did they consider him divine?

2. In your opinion, what drove Christian theologians to devise the doctrine of the Trinity, that is, that there are three equal persons in the Godhead, yet there is only one God?

Do We Have the Original New Testament?

Lecture 23

Until recent times, almost no one except scholars asked whether we had the original New Testament, but it's an important question. Many Christians base not just their religious views but their lives on the words of the New Testament. What if we don't know what the original words were? In this lecture, we'll see that, in fact, we don't have access to the original writings of the New Testament; what we have are copies of copies made by amateurs and dating to 300 or more years after the originals were written. We'll look at how many mistakes these copies might contain and whether we can ever get to the original text of the New Testament.

Literary Texts from the Ancient World

- We do not have the originals of any literary texts from the ancient world. What we have are copies that usually come to us from many centuries after the authors first produced their work. In most cases, we can be reasonably sure that we have the book more or less as the author wanted it to be, but the fact that we have only much later copies obviously creates problems.

- It does not take much imagination to realize what happens when a book is copied by hand, especially by people who are not trained to do the job: Mistakes are made. Even more problematically, some ancient scribes intentionally changed texts to alter their meaning. Later scribes replicated earlier mistakes and made mistakes or intentional changes of their own.

- Most of our copies of ancient texts come to us from the Middle Ages and were made, for the most part, by highly trained scribes. But in the early years of copying the writings of Paul or the gospels, the scribes were almost certainly not professionally trained to produce accurate copies. These scribes would have been anyone in the community who could read and write and took on the job of reproducing the community's important texts to be read aloud in meetings.

Variations in the New Testament

- It may be true that we have more copies of the New Testament than any other book from the ancient world, but that doesn't mean we can trust this book. It's not even necessarily true that we know what the authors originally wrote, and even if we did, that still doesn't mean the New Testament can be trusted. Knowing what an author has said doesn't mean knowing that he was right. Despite what some apologists have claimed, the number of copies we have of the New Testament is irrelevant to the question of whether it can be trusted.

- In fact, we have some 5,500 manuscripts of the New Testament in Greek, the language in which it was originally written. Some of these are entire manuscripts, and some are tiny fragments. These manuscripts date from the early 2nd century, through the Middle Ages, and up to and past the invention of printing in the 15th century.

- Throughout the Middle Ages, most scribes appear not to have understood that changes in manuscripts presented a problem. Such changes were recognized as a problem in the early 18th century, when an Oxford scholar named John Mill published a printed edition of the Greek New Testament.
    - In this edition, Mill printed the text of the New Testament at the top of the page, and at the bottom, he printed the differences among the Greek manuscripts he had examined. He also included differences that he detected in different translations, such as Latin, Coptic, Syriac, and so forth.

    - In all, Mill had access to 100 manuscripts, and he noted 30,000 variations. In the 5,500 manuscripts we have today, scholars estimate that there may be 200,000 to 400,000 variations. There are more mistakes in our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.

- Most of these hundreds of thousands of variations are insignificant and purely accidental. For example, a scribe accidentally leaves out a letter, a word, a sentence, or an entire page.

- An instance of the eye skipping from one line to another when both lines end in the same words is called parablepsis; the literary device of ending lines in the same words is called homoeoteleuton.

- The majority of errors scholars find in the New Testament are instances of parablepsis occasioned by homoeoteleuton.

Intentional Changes in the New Testament

- An example of an intentional change in the New Testament can be found in the story about Jesus and the woman taken in adultery. As we saw in an earlier lecture, the woman is dragged before Jesus by the authorities, who ask whether she should be stoned according to the Law of Moses or let go. Jesus says, "Let the one without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her."
  - This story, which today can be found in John 7–8, is powerful and moving, but it was not originally in the Gospel of John. The oldest manuscripts of this gospel don't have the story, and it is written in a completely different style from the rest of the gospel. Church fathers who wrote commentaries on the Gospel of John don't know of this story until the 12th century.

  - It's possible that a scribe added a story about Jesus that he had heard from the oral tradition that related to passages in John in which Jesus tells people that they shouldn't judge others inappropriately. Perhaps this scribe wrote his story in the margin, and a later scribe thought that the marginal story had been accidentally left out and should be reinserted in the text.

  - Later scribes copied the mistake until it came down in the Greek manuscript tradition. English translators, such as those of the King James Bible, used these Greek manuscripts, bringing the story into English. Virtually all textual scholars agree that the story of the woman taken in adultery is a noncanonical story that was added to the text.

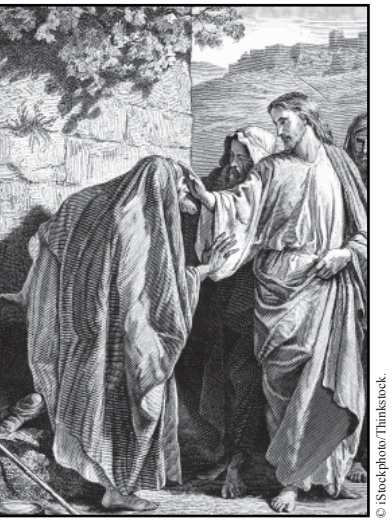
- Another example involves the last 12 verses of the Gospel of Mark. Earlier, we saw that Mark's gospel is unique in its description of what happens when the women find the empty tomb three days after Jesus was crucified. Instead of Jesus's body, they find a man who tells them that they are to go tell the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee. Then, the gospel says that the women fled from the tomb in fear and didn't say anything to anyone. The gospel ends at this point.
    - It's interesting to note that throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tries to keep his identity as the Son of God secret. Whenever people recognize him as the Son of God, Jesus tells them not to tell anyone. When he casts out demons and they declare him the Son of God, he silences them. His identity is unknown to most people in the narrative of the Gospel of Mark, including his own disciples. And at the end, the disciples still don't know because the women never tell them.

    - This ending to the gospel is striking, but earlier scribes who copied this gospel had a different reaction. Surely, the women told someone, and surely, the disciples saw Jesus afterwards because that's how the story is narrated in Matthew, Luke, and John. These early scribes added an ending that is reproduced in brackets in most Bibles today.

    - The bracketed ending consists of 12 verses in which the women tell the disciples what they saw; the disciples go to Galilee and meet Jesus, who gives them his final commission. We find this ending in many later manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark, even though our two earliest and best manuscripts of the gospel don't have it.

    - Once again, almost all textual scholars believe that these 12 verses were not original to Mark. The writing style is different from the rest of the gospel, and the transition between the original ending and these additional 12 verses is rough and ungrammatical.

- A third example, from chapter 1 in the Gospel of Mark, is one of the most interesting healing stories involving Jesus. A man who has leprosy comes to Jesus and asks to be healed. Jesus reaches out his hand, touches the man, and says, "I am willing, be cleansed." In the context of this story, Mark tells us that Jesus felt compassion for the man, but in one of our oldest copies of the Gospel of Mark, the emotion ascribed to Jesus is anger. It's likely that one or more scribes were offended by the idea that Jesus would get angry and changed the text.



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In the original story of Jesus healing a leper in Mark 1, a scribe may have changed Jesus's reaction from anger to compassion.

- A final change comes to us from the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 24:36, Jesus preaches passionately about the coming end of the age. His disciples ask when Jesus will arise, and he says, "No one knows the day or the hour when the end will come, not the angels in heaven, nor even the Son, but the Father alone."
  - Scribes who read this passage must have thought it peculiar that Jesus would declare that the Son of God doesn't know when the end will come.
  - They dealt with the problem by simply taking out the words; in the changed text, Jesus says, "No one knows the hour, not the angels in heaven, but the Father alone."

- These intentional changes of the text are sometimes difficult for scholars to detect, and many of them have sparked heated debates. Scholars have devised complicated methods for detecting changes and reconstructing what was probably the oldest form of the text. They look to see what readings are found in the oldest manuscripts, evaluate which manuscripts appear to have the highest quality of text in general, examine the author's style, and consider what kind of text a scribe would be more likely to change.

- The problem with these methods is that we don't have extensive manuscripts of any of the books of the New Testament. We don't have manuscripts from the 1st century and hardly any from the 2nd century to help us reconstruct the text.

- Given the limitations of our evidence, scholars continue to debate whether we can ever get back to the original text of the New Testament.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*.

Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels.*

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think it's possible ever to know what the original writings of the New Testament actually said?

2. What are the greatest obstacles in reconstructing the original writings of the New Testament?

Who Chose the Books of the New Testament?

Lecture 24

The word "canon" comes from the Greek *kanōn*, which originally referred to a straight edge or a measuring rod. It came to mean the extent or scope of something, a confined group of things that all followed the same line. Applied to books, it meant some kind of collection, especially an authoritative collection. Some people are surprised to learn that the canon of the New Testament did not drop from the sky, whole and intact, a few years after Jesus died. In fact, it came into being over a long period of time. As we will see, it was centuries before there was widespread agreement on all the particulars of which books should be included.

Background to Choosing the Canon

- As we have seen, Jesus and his followers already had a canon, the canon of Jewish scriptures, although there were differences about which books were considered authoritative. Jews agreed, however, on the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish scriptures: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Most also accepted the writings of the Prophets as authoritative.

- The Jewish scriptures were the authoritative texts for the earliest Christians, especially the Torah and the Prophets, and they were understood to be scripture given by God. Before the end of the 1st century, Christians considered other books equally authoritative. The words of Jesus were taken to be authoritative interpretations of scripture and authoritative in and of themselves. Moreover, the writings of apostles, such as Paul, were seen to be authoritative expressions of truth.

- This movement to accept both Jesus and his apostles as sacred authorities can be seen in some of the later books of the New Testament itself. For example, 1 Timothy 5:18, probably written toward the end of the 1st century, quotes a saying of Jesus and treats

it as scripture. In 2 Peter 3:15–16, probably written early in the 2nd century, Paul's writings are put on the same level as other scriptures.

- A number of factors probably motivated Christians to start developing distinctively Christian authorities: to differentiate Christianity from Judaism, to protect sacred writings during persecution, and to determine right beliefs in the face of diversity. As we've seen, however, accepting apostolic words as authoritative led to problems: There were many writings that claimed to be written by apostles, and different Christian groups had different understandings of the faith, each of which considered different books authoritative.

Criteria for Selection

- One group of Christians ended up winning the debates and established what would be the form of Christian orthodoxy for all time. Naturally, the books of this group were eventually accepted as part of the canon, but even among the orthodox, there were problems and questions. Should the Epistle of Barnabas be accepted? What about the anonymous Letter to the Hebrews or the Gospel of Peter? The church fathers generally applied four criteria to determine which books were acceptable in the canon.

- First, in order for a book to be accepted as part of the canon of scripture, it had to be ancient. If a book did not go back to the time of Jesus and his apostles, then it could not be accepted.

- Second, a book had to be apostolic, meaning that it had to be written by an apostle or under the authority of an apostle. Anonymous books, such as the book of Hebrews or the gospels, had to be attributed to apostles or companions of apostles. For this reason, the gospels were attributed to two of Jesus's disciples, Matthew and John, and to two companions of the apostles, Mark, the companion of Peter, and Luke, the companion of Paul.

- In addition to antiquity and apostolicity, a book had to evidence catholicity ("universality"). Books had to have widespread appeal

throughout the entire church; they could not simply be local favorites. This appeal to catholicity caused problems for some books that eventually did make it into the New Testament, such as 2 Peter, Jude, and 2 and 3 John. The fact that these books were not widely used was an argument against their inclusion. Eventually, the argument was overcome as more Christians started reading these books.

- The most important criterion was orthodoxy. A book had to toe the theological line. In one incident related by Eusebius, a 2nd-century church father named Serapion initially approved a Gospel of Peter for use in worship services by a community in Syria. If Peter wrote a gospel, it was obviously acceptable. Later, when Serapion read the gospel, he determined that it embraced a Docetic Christology and, thus, could not have been written by Peter.
  - Serapion's approach to determining authorship is an interesting one: The gospel does not seem to be orthodox from a theological perspective; thus, Peter could not have written it, and if Peter did not write it, it could not be accepted as scripture.
  - Orthodoxy was an important criterion for determining which books would be included in scripture; those that embraced a nonorthodox theology were ruled out.

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Eventually, the church concluded that the author of the Apocalypse of John was the disciple, even though, historically, we now know that it almost certainly was not.

Formation of the Canon

- By the end of the 2nd century, there was widespread agreement among most groups that considered themselves orthodox that the four gospels could be accepted as being scriptural. It was also widely agreed that the book of Acts was an authoritative document, along with the 13 letters of Paul and the books that we now call 1 John and 1 Peter. Other books, such as the Apocalypse of John, the book of Hebrews, and 2 Peter, were hotly debated.

- It's often thought that this matter of determining the final canon of scripture was debated and decided at the Council of Nicaea, possibly under the direction of the emperor Constantine. But the council did not discuss which books should be in the canon, and as far as we know, Constantine never expressed interest in the question of the canon. In fact, the canon was decided later, after the Council of Nicaea, and it was decided by no one person or group.

- The first person to list the 27 books of the New Testament as canonical was Athanasius, who eventually became a bishop of the church in Alexandria. As bishop, he wrote a yearly letter to the churches in his jurisdiction, giving them pastoral advice and telling them on what day Easter would be celebrated in a given year. These are called Festal Letters because they indicate when the feast of Easter would be celebrated.
    - In the 39th Festal Letter, written for the year 367 C.E., Athanasius lists the books that he considers to be scripture. The 27 books of the New Testament we know today and only those 27 books are listed; Athanasius says that no other books can be accepted as canonical.

    - Even Athanasius's letter, however, did not solve the problem once and for all. Debates continued among Christians. Several manuscripts of the New Testament that we have today that were produced in the 4th through early 6th centuries have other books in them besides the 27.

- One of the most famous manuscripts of the New Testament is called Codex Sinaiticus, discovered in a monastery on Mount Sinai in the 19th century. Codex Sinaiticus is from the middle of the 4th century, and it includes the Epistle of Barnabas and a book called the Shepherd of Hermas. Codex Alexandrinus, a manuscript produced in the early 5th century, contains two books called 1 Clement and 2 Clement as part of its scripture.

- By the 5th century, widespread agreement had been reached about the canon. The question was never was put to the vote of a council in the early church. Instead, the decision to include the 27 books emerged by consensus and by a decision of orthodox scribes concerning which books to copy.

Continuing Controversies

- In this course, we've dealt with 24 controversies of early Christianity, but there are many more, and controversies in Christianity continue even today. For example, in 2006, *National Geographic* announced the discovery and restoration of the most recent Gnostic gospel to appear, the Gospel of Judas. Controversy surrounding the authenticity of this gospel, its date, its views, its portrayal of Judas, and its historical reliability is ongoing.

- A group of people known as mythicists, who are active on the Internet, maintain that Jesus of Nazareth did not exist but that he was a myth invented by Christians. We have many compelling reasons, however, to believe in the existence of Jesus.
  - It's extremely unlikely that anyone in the ancient world would have made up a crucified messiah. In fact, crucifixion was precisely the problem in convincing people that Jesus was the messiah.

  - A second reason for believing in the existence of Jesus is that the apostle Paul knew one of Jesus's brothers, James.

  - Scholars are absolutely confident that Jesus existed, but the mythicist controversy hasn't died out.

- Another recent controversy is one surrounding the discovery of an alleged gospel fragment written in Coptic, the Gospel of Jesus's Wife. Most scholars who have examined this gospel have concluded that it is probably a modern forgery.

- New discoveries often lead to new controversies, but even standard scholarly knowledge can lead to controversy. Critical scholars recognize discrepancies, forgeries, and historical problems in the text of the New Testament, but many readers hold that the Bible is perfect, infallible, and inerrant.

- Is there something about Christianity that makes it an inherently controversial religion? Early on in Christianity, it was decided that Jesus alone was the way of salvation and that without Jesus, one could not have salvation. In other words, from the beginning, Christianity was an exclusivistic religion that insisted that it was right and all other religions were wrong. This exclusivity made Christianity unique in the ancient world.
    - Not only were all other religions wrong for the early Christians, but all nonorthodox interpretations of the writings of his apostles were wrong. If being right is what matters before God and there are many opinions about being right on many issues, then there are many people who could be wrong, and all of them are in danger of eternal damnation.

    - The stakes are particularly high for an exclusivistic religion, such as Christianity, which is why the controversies, for those inside the religion, matter. It is also why Christianity has been and always will be a controversial religion.

Suggested Reading

Ehrman, *After the New Testament*.

———, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code*.

Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*.

Metzger, *The New Testament Canon: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*.

Questions to Consider

1. Summarize the criteria that the orthodox Christians used to determine which books should be accepted as part of the New Testament.

2. Do you think the question of the canon should be reopened so that some other books could be allowed in and others taken out? If the question were reopened, how would you choose what to change?

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